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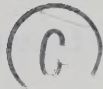


THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

URBAN WORKING-CLASS HOUSING IN LATE VICTORIAN ENGLAND:

THE ROYAL COMMISSION OF 1884-1885.

by



BRONWEN M. HOLDEN

A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Housing conditions in the nineteenth century for most people who lived in towns were unsatisfactory in nearly every respect. Early attempts at reform were very limited and almost invariably unsuccessful. In the Spring of 1884, in response to widespread anxiety about the housing of the urban working-class population, the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes was set up to examine and report on the whole problem.

The evidence produced by this Commission on working-class housing in England provides a unique insight into this aspect of nineteenth century social history. Equally important, the Commission's hearings and the Report record the assumptions and mentality of those who saw it as their duty to study and pronounce upon the problem. The Commissioners found that overcrowding was the "central evil" but concentrated their recommendations on less problematic aspects of the housing question. The overcrowding demanded drastic remedies which were inconceivable without a fundamental change in the dominant social philosophy.

The last part of this thesis seeks to examine in more detail the factors which held back real housing reform until after the First World War.





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## CHAPTER I

### WORKING-CLASS HOUSING AND SOCIETY TO 1884

Housing conditions are not a complete test of a civilization, nor is the amount of overcrowding according to any official definition an absolute gauge of housing conditions, but the conditions have more than a purely economic meaning, are perhaps most important in spheres of value higher than the purely economic; and other gauges--of dirt, crime, disease--are apt to give readings which agree rather closely with those of the overcrowding gauge.

(J. H. Clapham, An Economic History of Modern Britain, Vol. III, p.464.)

The economic historian, J. H. Clapham, saw housing as a touchstone for other standards, a yardstick to measure the priorities of a whole society. This view of housing conditions is now, in theory at least, generally accepted. The Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, which sat from 1884 to 1885, marks the point when politicians, administrators and the middle class public came to recognize the crucial importance of housing for the physical, social, economic and (as contemporaries would have phrased it) the moral welfare of the nation, and the point when the significance of overcrowding for other housing conditions was understood. The subject had aroused some interest earlier in the century, as the Shaftesbury, Cross and Torrens Housing Acts, the work of philanthropists and articles on housing in leading periodicals show.<sup>1</sup>





But before the 1880's the interest was restricted and confined to a few individuals. The Royal Commission reflected a new, more widespread and comprehensive concern. The members of the Commission were aware of the wide range of problems which were relevant to housing and in the evidence they took, the whole context of working-class housing in the late nineteenth century was explored.

Despite this great advance in understanding the problems, the implications of the Commission's findings remained unrecognized by the public and the majority of the Commissioners themselves. The Commission's view of the housing question was bounded by political and economic considerations which prevented the formulation of real solutions. There is usually a time-lag between the recognition of social problems and the abandonment of institutional and ideological barriers to reform. In 1885 the restraints on effective housing policy proved too powerful. During the next 35 years this situation gradually changed. New solutions to the old problem of housing came to seem imperative, whatever reversals in social theory these solutions might imply. The Royal Commission on Housing failed to initiate immediate, tangible change, but the Commission was an important stage in the emergence of housing as a priority in the minds of those who formulate social policy.

Urban housing was one of many social problems which



clamoured for attention in nineteenth century Britain. When one considers the adjustments that a newly urbanized, newly industrialized society demands of its people it is perhaps less surprising that housing only gradually became recognized as a problem separate from (though closely connected with) other sanitary, economic or moral issues. All of these connected problems arose in the context of phenomenal urban growth. The bare statistics are startling. When the first wave of the industrial revolution was at its height in the 1820's, the large cities of the North and Midlands all experienced population increases of over 40%. Though the industrial towns of Lancashire tended to grow more slowly after that, other towns and cities, particularly those which depended on the newer industries such as engineering, continued to grow at a rapid rate. London had a population of just over two million in 1841; by 1881 the figure was just under five million, and this was roughly the population of all urban areas sixty years before. By 1851 the number of people living in towns was more than half the total population (a proportion reached by the United States in 1920) and this urban population was increasingly concentrated in six built-up areas where the problems of housing, particularly overcrowding, tended to be most serious.<sup>2</sup>

The experience that lay behind these statistics was profoundly disturbing. Urbanization brought new





opportunities but it also created new problems and exaggerated old ones. With the quantitative change there was a qualitative one. "Twelve insanitary houses on a hillside may be a picturesque village, but twelve hundred are a grave nuisance, and twelve thousand a pest and a horror."<sup>3</sup> The difficulties inevitably attendant on rapid urbanization were increased by the chaotic nature of urban growth in Britain. With no previous experience to guide development, little understanding of social costs, and confidence in the efficacy of unrestricted growth, nineteenth century towns were left to spread rank and unplanned. It was assumed that some amenities--churches, shops and also houses--would automatically appear where they were needed. The necessity for other facilities such as open spaces, sewage removal and a pure water supply went unrecognized until the first spurt of urbanization was over. Public opinion, preoccupied with the achievements of the industrial revolution and concerned with other matters, lagged behind social needs. The result was a backlog of urban problems which has continued to the present.

In theory, the new demand for housing would create an adequate supply in a free market. In practice this meant that housing for a vastly increased urban working-class population, which received little more than a subsistence wage and sometimes even less, had to compete with the other demands of a rapidly expanding and largely





unregulated economy. Housing was only one of a wide range of opportunities for investment, and to pay a competitive return investment in housing had to yield between 8% and 10% (today it yields around 4%).<sup>4</sup> Even the philanthropic housing societies anticipated a return of 5%. What capital there was for housing was directed largely towards the building of new middle-class suburbs as those who could afford to do so escaped from the increasingly unpleasant inner cities.<sup>5</sup> There was some building of working-class housing in the new industrial centres where there had been none at all before. But in the absence of adequate building regulations or public pressure these houses were built to minimal standards. Since working-class wages were low and there was no widespread system of purchase by installments, the effective demand was for cheap rental accommodation and therefore low quality housing was supplied.<sup>6</sup> In the centre of most cities, especially the older ones like London or Bristol, the poor supplied themselves with housing as best they could. As the large old houses fell empty when the middle-class families moved out, they were subdivided and sublet to provide a succession of landlords and subletting tenants with an income. The final result was high rents, overcrowding and the rapid deterioration of the environment. Moreover, the supply of working-class houses in city centres was constantly being depleted by demolition for roads, railways and commercial and public buildings.



It is clear that the wretched living conditions of the working class in the nineteenth century were intimately linked with the economic expansion of the period. This applied to housing as to everything else. As H. J. Dyos points out, "it is arguable that better housing would have reduced the flow of capital which helped sustain Britain's open economy and that low standards therefore helped to channel resources into production at a rewarding rate." But Dyos also spells out the other side of the argument. "Among the costs of economic expansion then was poor housing for ordinary people then and since."<sup>7</sup> The setting up of the Royal Commission on Housing was one of the first signs that this cost was being recognized.

The Housing Commission is one of the few reliable sources we have for the housing conditions of the majority of the urban population in Victorian Britain. Statistical records of social conditions were only gradually compiled as such figures came to seem important. For a long time the statistics that were collected gave only the crudest indications of the welfare of the nation: birth and death rates, records of cholera outbreaks. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that social investigators like Booth and Rowntree began to record in comprehensive detail the life of the urban poor, taking note of wages and rents, diet, housing conditions, work and leisure. Since housing was not generally recognized as a problem





separate from the broad question of public health before the 1880's, housing conditions must be inferred from other kinds of information. Death rates, statistics of certain significant diseases such as typhus and tuberculosis are useful but these must be supplemented by descriptions of slums by sanitary reformers, missionaries, journalists and novelists, even though such accounts tend to be vague and gothic in style with little accurate detail. There are also the drawings of a few interested artists, notably Gustave Doré.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that the Commission was set up partly because the need for more concrete evidence was recognized. But the Commission could only draw together and attempt to verify the knowledge that already existed. More detailed and extensive data had to wait for the development of social research techniques as well as the maturing of public concern. However, it must be remembered that people do not need statistical evidence to become aware that something is wrong. The pamphlet which precipitated the Housing Commission, The Bitter Cry of Outcast London, taught thousands that there was a housing problem without giving them a statistical profile of "Mammon's Rents."

Although the mid and late Victorian public remained unaware for a long time that there was a housing problem as such, it could not altogether ignore the poverty which paradoxically accompanied urban growth and national pros-





perity. Signs of poverty and deprivation were inescapable. There were crossing sweepers, beggars, flower girls and match sellers in the streets, barefooted children, and hundreds of people sleeping outdoors or under the railway arches in the large towns and cities. But these things were often accepted as an inevitable part of the landscape and few middle-class people ever penetrated into slum areas.

It was the epidemics which swept through the country in the nineteenth century which alerted the middle and upper-classes in a dramatic way to the living conditions of their working-class compatriots. While the more insidious effects of slum life could be disregarded, it was impossible to ignore epidemics of fatal diseases which affected all classes of society. Cholera made the most profound impression, particularly during the outbreaks of the 30's and 40's. Cholera was, says Asa Briggs, "the one epidemic disease which universally quickened social apprehensions."<sup>9</sup> Typhus and diptheria were other diseases which, once they gained a hold, spread beyond slum districts to threaten the whole population. Even before the origin of these diseases and the means by which they spread were known, their connexion with poverty, overcrowding, insufficient light, air, water and sanitation was obvious. The epidemics began where these conditions were present and retained their strongest hold there. Fear, coupled with frustration at the economic waste produced by disease, led



to the sanitary reform movement of the 1830's and 40's and though this movement ignored the housing problem, attention was inevitably focussed on the urban slums.<sup>10</sup>

The early legislation which dealt with housing reflected the concerns of the sanitary movement; indeed the "sanitary idea" coloured the official attitude towards housing throughout the nineteenth century. The aim of the sanitary movement was to prevent the most virulent diseases by inducing cities and towns to provide pure water and "nuisance" and sewage removal--the bare necessities of town life which had nevertheless been neglected during the first wave of urbanization. The contribution of Edwin Chadwick, the most famous exponent of the "sanitary idea," and his followers to this field of public health cannot be overrated. For housing their work was less beneficial. The worst slum houses came to be regarded as nuisances, to be removed by inspection or demolition; the social and economic dimensions of poor housing were not considered, and slums were regarded as causes rather than symptoms of social problems in the cities.

Under the Nuisances Removal Acts (the first passed in 1846, followed by three more during the next two decades), Medical Officers of Health were given the power to condemn houses as unfit for occupation for sanitary reasons or because of overcrowding. The Shaftesbury Acts of 1851 (the Common Lodging Houses Act and the Labouring Classes



Lodging Houses Act) were more directly related to housing conditions and are generally regarded as the first housing acts. They reflected Lord Shaftesbury's concern with the vagrant population, providing for the regulation of existing doss-houses and the establishment of common lodging houses, where they were needed, through the agency of local sanitary authorities. The Shaftesbury Acts were not concerned with the housing needs of the general population; they were directed at a particular group, the homeless vagrants. The Shaftesbury Acts failed to achieve even their limited objective; the act providing for publicly established lodging houses in particular was a dead letter from the day it was passed.<sup>11</sup>

The next significant piece of legislation for the improvement of working-class housing was the Sanitary Act of 1866. Sanitary inspectors were made compulsory in urban areas and they were empowered to visit multiple-occupancy houses to enforce the rules against overcrowding, which was now defined as a nuisance. The Housing Commissioners took great interest in the operation of this act, for they shared to a degree the confidence of the act's sponsors that inspection, by itself, could in some inexplicable way reduce overcrowding and improve housing conditions. Section 35 of the Sanitary Act was regarded as particularly significant. Under it local authorities were allowed to draw up their own bye-laws for the inspection of





tenements, by night if necessary. The Commissioners regarded the use made of Section 35 as a good indication of the efficiency and conscientiousness of the local authority.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the housing legislation passed during the nineteenth century was rarely, if ever, put into practice. From the point of view of practical application, the most important acts of this period were those named after McCullagh Torrens and Sir Richard Cross, one of whom was a Liberal M.P. and the other a Conservative M.P.; both were future members of the Housing Commission. The Torrens Acts consisted of the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Act of 1868 and the Amending Acts of 1879 and 1882. Under these acts proceedings could be taken against the owners of insanitary property and where improvement was impossible, the property could be purchased by the local authority and demolished. The Torrens Acts were directed at individual houses or small groups, where a minimum of effort could produce the maximum improvement. The Cross Acts, the Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings Improvement Act of 1875 with its Amending Act of 1879, aimed at the clearance of large slum areas. Here inevitably the procedure was reversed: compulsory purchase was the first step rather than the last resort. Another significant change was that authorities were now required to provide housing where they had demolished inhabited dwellings, though not necessarily to rehouse the same people. However, this provision was



almost universally ignored, and local authorities correctly interpreted the Cross Acts as slum clearance rather than housing legislation. Though the Cross and Torrens Acts were not applied as widely as had been hoped, notable use was made of the Cross Acts in the Birmingham Corporation Street Scheme.<sup>13</sup>

By 1882 there was considerable disappointment at the small number of authorities which had taken full opportunity of the existing acts, particularly the Cross and Torrens Acts, and a Parliamentary Select Committee was set up to investigate the reasons for this. The Committee concluded that the high rate of compensation awarded in cases of compulsory purchase was one of the most important factors. Legislation was accordingly passed to facilitate fairer compensation payments. The Committee also reported that more use might be made of the Cross Acts if the provision requiring the rehousing of a number equal to the number evicted were modified. Thus the Select Committee sought to reduce what little constructive housing legislation had been written into the Cross Acts. This was all the more ironic since part of the Committee's terms of reference had commented on the failure of existing legislation to encourage the building of working-class housing. Given the contemporary interpretation of slum clearance and housing reform these two goals inevitably conflicted, and the Committee endorsed the basic concept behind the Cross





and Torrens Acts--slum clearance--proposing only minor modifications.<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to understand the importance contemporaries attached to these acts. Their objectives were limited and in some towns slum clearance schemes had already been undertaken under local acts; a notable example was Liverpool. Since schemes under the Cross Acts required Parliamentary approval the procedure for undertaking large-scale demolition had not been radically changed.

Other legislation, potentially more important than the slum clearance acts, was written into the statute books during the second half of the nineteenth century. Much of this had to do with public loans for building working-class housing. The Labouring Classes Dwelling Houses Act of 1866 made loans available through the Public Works Loans Commission (a body originally concerned with large schemes such as harbours) for the construction of working-class housing. These loans could be granted to local authorities, philanthropic or manufacturing companies, or individuals. The rate of interest was not less than 4% and the loan had to be repaid within 40 years. Moreover, more than half the funds for the proposed scheme had to be found by the borrower. The Cross Acts allowed local authorities to borrow from the Public Works Loans Board on the security of the rates and they were granted slightly more favourable terms: a loan period of 50 years and a rate of interest of not less than  $3\frac{1}{2}\%$ . These borrowing terms were tightened



again in 1879. By 1885 money had been granted to the Peabody Fund, the Industrial Dwellings Company and London and Birmingham City Corporations through the Board, but the Housing Commission was disappointed that more bodies had not taken advantage of Treasury loans.<sup>15</sup> The terms on which the loans were granted were certainly not generous, but there was a more basic factor which the Commission failed to recognize. This type of scheme implied a political concept, public housing, which most people (including the majority of the Commissioners) were not prepared to accept.

Other minor legislation included the Working Men's Dwellings Act of 1874, which empowered municipalities to make grants of land or money for housing. This act was rarely, if ever, used. The Public Health Act of 1875 was of some importance for preventing the growth of future slums: local authorities were allowed to draw up their own building regulations and cellar dwellings were banned.<sup>16</sup>

The authorities responsible for putting most of this legislation into effect were the bodies which made up the local government structure. The chaotic state of local government in the nineteenth century, particularly in London, is well known, and this inefficiency and corruption was a continuing source of grievance among the concerned public. At the time of the Housing Commission many people felt that reform of any kind was futile while local government remained in such disarray. Responsibility was divided



amongst a number of ad hoc bodies for the administration of the Poor Law, education and sanitary matters. Street lighting, cleaning and so on came under a variety of authorities --a vestry, a municipal corporation, a local board, or a combination of these--according to the city or town. Public Health Acts were administered after 1875 by the Borough Councils, where these existed; but in London the sanitary authority was the vestry or District Board (a union of several small parishes) under the overall authority of the Metropolitan Board of Works.<sup>17</sup> The local sanitary authorities were in theory chosen by the ratepayers in democratic elections. Aside from the question of whether a franchise extending only to ratepayers can be said to be truly democratic, the Housing Commission soon discovered that property qualifications for candidates, public apathy and the vigilant self-interest of a few local property owners tended to leave the enforcement of legislation in the hands of men who had little concern for the public good. This was particularly true of the London vestries.

In 1871 an important step towards centralization and standardization was taken with the setting up of the Local Government Board. This body drew together the three previously separate authorities responsible for local government: the public health branch of the Privy Council, the Local Government Act Department of the Home Office and the Poor Law Board. The Local Government Board gave some





opportunity for concerned administrators and politicians to initiate reform through local government; Sir Charles Dilke, President of the Board from 1882 to 1885 and Chairman of the Housing Commission was one who took advantage of this. But local government remained undemocratic and anachronistic in many ways; and London, which seemed to defeat all attempts at administrative reform, continued to be the worst governed city in the country. In 1881, when its population was already nearly 5 million, there was still no central body responsible for administration, and the operation of the housing acts (except the Cross Acts) continued to be dependent on the ancient and corrupt vestries. The situation was greatly improved in 1888 with the creation of the London County Council, although anomalies and anachronisms persisted. But at the time of the Royal Commission on Housing, London government was notorious in a country not noted for the efficiency of its local government.<sup>18</sup>

Moral as well as sanitary concerns drew the attention of the late Victorian public to the housing of the working class. Evangelizing zeal sent many people into the slums: the Anglican Samuel Barnett, the Anglo-Catholic Father Dolling, General Booth of the Salvation Army, the Congregationalist author of The Bitter Cry of Outcast London, were among the best known.<sup>19</sup> Whatever their own ideas about poverty and the poor (and some rejected the simple, conventional approach), slum missionaries, along with sanitary



reformers, doctors and journalists, tended to reinforce contemporary social prejudices while helping to make the Victorian public more aware of the slums.

Like explorers in newly discovered territory the observers sent back astonished and alarmed reports to the outside world, and the public became more sensitive towards these accounts as the century progressed. Though the reports made reference to the material living conditions, the moral and spiritual condition of the poor troubled the missionaries and other middle-class observers as much, if not more. The urban working-class did not save money, did not wash, and they were sexually immoral. The Victorians possessed a boundless capacity to be shocked at details; but the new revelations simply confirmed generally accepted beliefs. It was widely assumed that since society was controlled by impartial and ultimately benign forces, the most deserving rose while the least deserving sank, inevitably, into destitution. Although there might be exceptions, wealth and security were seen as the rewards and the result of hard work and firm principles. Provision of the necessities of life to those who refused to earn them was generally considered wrong on moral and foolish on economic grounds. This attitude, prevalent to a greater or lesser extent throughout the nineteenth century, was the most formidable obstacle to social reform in this period. Even in the 1880's, when the strictly individualistic view





of society was slowly changing, these ideas were still powerful enough to prevent any major housing reform, since reform would have entailed some protection for certain groups from inexorable moral and economic laws.

Though numerically insignificant, the philanthropic housing societies of the nineteenth century were for contemporaries an important development. There was a spate of interest in charitable housing schemes in the 1840's when organizations like the Metropolitan Association for the Improvement of the Dwellings of the Industrial Classes and the Society for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Labouring Classes were set up. Interest then died down for a time, but from the 1860's there was a constant expansion of charitable work in this field. Among the organizations which appeared at this time were the East End Dwellings Company, the Four Per Cent Dwellings Company (a Jewish organization), societies in Hastings and Bristol, London and Liverpool, the Peabody society and Octavia Hill's housing schemes.<sup>20</sup>

All these organizations were founded on an ambiguous principle. While their very existence contravened contemporary social theory by protecting some people from the full harshness of the housing market, in their practical operations the housing societies sought to reinforce the economic and moral tenets of the age. Their primary object was the encouragement of middle-class virtues among the



working class. Their second aim was to demonstrate that the poor could be housed decently, even in city centres, at some profit. Thrift, cleanliness and propriety would be rewarded with a flat in a "model" tenement and this would serve as an example to others. Model dwellings also seemed to be one obvious way of attacking the physical conditions of the slums by reducing overcrowding, providing some working-class people with better housing and showing private builders what they could do on a commercial basis.<sup>21</sup>

The model tenements were not palatial; the flats usually consisted of one, two or three rooms with walls and floors made of some fireproof but unattractive material. Toilets and sometimes water taps were shared between several tenants, there were often outside staircases (then considered very advanced, at least for working-class dwellings), drying areas on the roofs and small dark yards between the buildings.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, there was such a demand for the model dwellings that the philanthropic societies were able to choose their tenants carefully. This selectivity was often an acknowledged policy. One Peabody superintendent told Beatrice Webb, "We had a rough lot to begin with... now only take men in regular employment."<sup>23</sup> There were rules against noise, overcrowding, undesirable trades and offensive habits, which effectively discriminated against the poorest class,<sup>24</sup> and the rents were relatively high. Most of the philanthropic societies aimed at a profit of



about 5% (it was unthinkable that even a charitable housing organization would not provide a return to investors), the central sites on which they built were expensive and the buildings themselves were costly despite the absence of decoration and amenities and the high density of people per acre.

It is clear that, with rents at more than 2s. a room, the rules against overcrowding and the deliberately exclusive policy of the management, the philanthropic housing societies catered for the better-off artisan, the aristocracy of labour, rather than the poorest and worst housed. While the poor (as defined by Charles Booth six years later in his Life and Labour of the People of London) earned £1 a week or less, the average Peabody tenant was earning £1 3s. and the tenants of the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company were earning around £1 8s.<sup>25</sup> Some witnesses argued before the Royal Commission that the philanthropic societies actually made things worse for the poorest, since slum housing was usually demolished to make way for the model dwellings. Only Octavia Hill deliberately aimed to house the lowest social class, but her experiments, based on the principle of personal supervision, were by definition small scale affairs.

Despite the proliferation of housing societies from the middle of the nineteenth century, contemporaries exaggerated their importance and misunderstood their signifi-





cance. In fact, philanthropy was totally inadequate to deal with the housing problem. Octavia Hill herself estimated that in London, where the greatest efforts were concentrated, after 30 years' work a number equal to six months' increase in the city's population had been housed by these organizations.<sup>26</sup> There was a growing disillusionment by the 1880's with the aims and achievements of philanthropic housing. Beatrice Webb, a barometer of advanced social thought in this period, recorded her experiences as a lady rent collector for the East End Dwellings Company and her increasing doubts about the efficiency of model dwellings in their present form for social progress.<sup>27</sup> It was widely recognized, as the evidence before the Housing Commission indicates, that "philanthropy and five per cent" did not reach the very poor, although even those who criticized these organizations were unwilling to abandon the twin principles of profit and re-education.

One historian of nineteenth century housing, H. J. Dyos, writes that the activities of the housing societies, particularly Octavia Hill's projects, seemed to many Victorians "to be demonstrating in a small way...that the slums could be thinned out economically, even commercially, and their occupants rehoused on the spot"; in fact "this was demonstrable on the smallest possible scale."<sup>28</sup> It is clear that this illusion was being abandoned by the end of the century (though it was harder to abandon the assumptions



behind it). Indeed the failure of philanthropy to improve to any significant extent the housing conditions of the poor may eventually have had the opposite effect to that suggested by Dyos. Another authority, whose field is twentieth century housing, writes that the main achievement of the model dwellings lay "not in providing a 'model' but in demonstrating the impossibility of providing decent housing for the poor without radical changes in housing policy."<sup>29</sup>

By the late nineteenth century it was becoming clear that inadequate and insufficient housing for working people was a major problem bequeathed by a century of industrialization, urbanization, population increase and public unconcern. The extent of the problem was not known, nor was its gravity; and the cause or causes were open to endless speculation. The problem of bad housing tended to be related to other issues which preoccupied thinking about society at the time; it was associated with the drink question or moral standards in general by many, while the heirs of Chadwick saw the problem mainly in sanitary terms. It was not acknowledged till after the First World War that housing was a distinct issue calling for specific remedies and that Britain needed a vast expansion in the supply of decent houses.<sup>30</sup> But in the 1880's, under pressure from philanthropists, journalists, politicians and the gradual recognition of the dimensions of the problem, attention began to focus more closely and anxiously than before on the housing of the working classes.



## CHAPTER II

### THE BITTER CRY, HOUSING AGITATION AND THE ROYAL COMMISSION

Along with many other social issues, the housing question sprang into prominence in the early 1880's. This decade stands out for historians, as it did for contemporaries, as the time when middle-class Englishmen became acutely aware of the problems and challenges in their society.<sup>1</sup> The Great Depression (certainly a reality in the minds of contemporaries), the maturing of an urban society and an industrial economy--these factors and others combined to produce a sense of crisis in which the accepted political and social assumptions seemed inadequate. A handful of socialists confidently predicted full-scale social revolution, while radicals looked forward to immediate and drastic reforms. Others, conservative by instinct but disturbed and fearful of what one writer on housing called "The East London Esau" advancing "with 400,000 men to meet us,"<sup>2</sup> sought to preserve the institutions of society by alleviating the worst sources of discontent. This was the period of the early Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation, the Settlement Movement, "New Unionism", the Royal Commissions on Agriculture, Labour and the Depression, and the start of Charles Booth's social survey Life and Labour of the People





of London. Intellectual ferment and the reappraisal of social assumptions were widespread at the time of the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes, and, while a study of this Commission contributes to our understanding of the development of social policy over the long term, it also illustrates the history of England in the 1880's. The anxiety, the recognition of new problems, and the groping for solutions, the conflicting ideas, the limitations and failures in the evidence and the Report are characteristic of social thought in this decade.

The sensitivity to the various aspects of the problem of poverty which was spreading among the middle and upper classes in the late nineteenth century was accompanied by an awareness of the geographical nature of urban poverty: the physical separation of rich and poor which had grown up almost unnoticed in the nineteenth century towns. The East End of London, for instance, took on the mystery of an alien, heathen civilization for those living in the West End or in the mushrooming suburbs. Jungle metaphors were frequent in the more sensational journalism. Social conscience and morbid fascination drew the attention of the public to "Horrible London"<sup>3</sup> and the slums of provincial cities. The Settlements, the Salvation Army, the missions (the African analogy again), the fashionable pastime of slumming and the more serious efforts of the philanthropists were aspects of this response. The concern was personal



and limited; there was very little knowledge of the social and economic background of poverty and almost no attempt to see the slums in a wider perspective. But there was certainly anxiety, curiosity and enthusiasm for some kind of reform.

An anonymous author took advantage of this interest to bring out a penny pamphlet in October, 1883, which sought to alert the public to what its title called The Bitter Cry of Outcast London. The author was (as he later admitted) the Reverend Andrew Mearns, a Congregationalist minister working in the East End. In his pamphlet Mearns vividly described life in "Colliers' Rents," a group of slum tenements in Bermondsey, emphasizing the moral and physical squalor of slum London: "This terrible flood of sin and misery is gaining upon us."<sup>4</sup> Mearns saw housing conditions as a crucial factor and went so far as to say that the state would have to secure for the poor the right to live in better housing "before the Christian missionary can have much chance with them."<sup>5</sup> But Mearns did not elaborate on this idea and his horror at the conditions together with his enthusiasm for reform were more impressive than the remedies he could suggest (missions, more landlord responsibility, stricter licensing laws). This was to be a recurring pattern in the debates which followed. Mearns' pamphlet did contain some important points, however. It attempted to show that housing was the focus



of the complex problems of urban slums and that crowding rather than sanitary conditions was the basic difficulty.

Mearns' pamphlet was immediately taken up by the Pall Mall Gazette. In 1883 the Pall Mall had just begun its famous muckraking career under its new editor, W. T. Stead. Stead was a colourful and ambiguous figure who combined sincere crusading zeal with an exuberant talent for yellow press journalism. The Bitter Cry campaign was, in Stead's words, "the first great 'coup', the first great 'boom' of the Pall Mall" under his editorship.<sup>6</sup> With a quick eye for a social evil and a good story, Stead promoted the theme of the pamphlet (while playing down Mearns' evangelical emphasis)<sup>7</sup> and featured follow-up articles and correspondence. In his characteristic fashion, Stead later declared that the Pall Mall's stand had "led Lord Salisbury to take action...and caused the appointment of that Royal Commission on the Housing of the Poor from which modern social legislation may be said to date."<sup>8</sup> This grotesque distortion contains an element of truth, for there is a definite link between the Pall Mall publicity for The Bitter Cry of Outcast London and the appointment of the Royal Commission early the following year. Henry Broadhurst's appeal in Parliament for legislation on working class housing a few months before had gone almost unnoticed,<sup>9</sup> and a series of articles featured in the Pictorial World earlier in 1883 met with little









articles to appear was by Lord Salisbury, who in the November issue of the National Review drew attention to the campaign that had been recently carried out, with partial success, to improve the housing conditions of the agricultural labourers. Salisbury admitted that urban slums were a more difficult and urgent problem. But he saw reason for hope in the present unconcern and in its as yet unpolitical character. He did not believe "there would be any serious conflict on the question whether an advance of public money ought to be expended," so long as a remedy could be agreed on. He called for more investigation, perhaps a public enquiry. But the article concludes with something of an anti-climax, with a plea for the extension of Octavia Hill's school of philanthropy, which "is probably the philosophy of the whole matter."<sup>16</sup>

For several reasons this article attracted wide attention. Salisbury was leader of the Opposition in the House of Lords, he had signed his article (still an unusual practice), and he had made tentative mental forays into dangerous territory (government loans, the question of low wages). Salisbury may well have planned his article before the appearance of Bitter Cry;<sup>17</sup> in any event this contribution to the housing debate gave the subject new prestige and importance. Joseph Chamberlain was quick to take issue with Salisbury in the Fortnightly Review. For Chamberlain this was an opportunity to air his views and



make political capital at the same time (the Radical Programme, with which he was associated, was appearing in installments in the same magazine). Chamberlain took up the attack with spirit declaring that Salisbury's interests were those of the wealthy propertied classes. Some of his suggestions (such as compulsory purchase) would result in further sacrifice of the poor to the landlords, while others, like the extension of philanthropic and employee housing, had "socialistic" implications. "It is simply a question of the rights of property and the rights of the community."<sup>18</sup> But even Chamberlain could not match the simple question with a simple answer. From the various suggestions he put forward (enforcement of existing laws, land taxation, reform of London Government) it is clear that Chamberlain, one of the most radical and original politicians of the day, was incapable of envisaging any large-scale or fundamental solution to the problem of the slums. The "municipal gospel" for which he was famous included slum clearance but not the supply of decent houses which could prevent the growth of slums.

In its December issue the Nineteenth Century made an interesting contribution to the debate in the form of four short articles collectively entitled "Commonsense and the Dwellings of the Poor." The articles were written by Octavia Hill, Lord Shaftesbury, H. O. Arnold-Forster and a Lancashire artisan, William Glazier. All the contribu-





tors attempted to offer practical suggestions which would allieviate, if not solve, the problem of the housing of the poor. Octavia Hill's article expressed in her familiar style a fear of public schemes on both moral and economic grounds. She advocated renovation and, if necessary, rebuilding by voluntary societies to provide simple, solid, and cheap accommodation to meet the needs of "the most ignorant class of people." Shaftesbury also feared "the mischief of state aid" which might undermine the independence and the morale of the poor; he hoped instead to see voluntary societies encouraged. Arnold-Forster thought that existing legislation, if enforced, could meet the situation. All these were familiar ideas, though it was useful to bring them together. William Glazier's contribution came last, and his article, the careful composition of a self-taught man, is interesting partly because of the very fact that his ideas were given space in the magazine. This exception makes more striking the rule that nineteenth century legislators and philanthropists showed almost no regard for the views of the poor whose lives they so confidently sought to organize. Glazier was not, of course, a member of the poorest class. He belonged to the aristocracy of labour and expressed the opinions and prejudices of that group. Glazier was hostile to the Irish and other destitute slum dwellers, and his main concern was that working men should be helped to become home owners.



But unlike others who rushed into print on this issue, Glazier had personal experience of overcrowding, low wages and the terrible insecurity that plagued even the most skilled working man. Glazier called for an enquiry into the cause of high rents and hoped that the Peabody Trust would receive government help.<sup>19</sup>

Two more articles in the flood of periodical literature which followed the publication of Bitter Cry must be mentioned. The December number of the Contemporary Review published a two-part feature on "The Outcast Poor" as a follow-up to Mearns' pamphlet. The first was by an Anglican clergyman, Brooke Lambert, who had spent several years working in East End parishes. He spoke of the threat of social revolution if the conditions exposed in The Bitter Cry of Outcast London were allowed to continue (the phrase about the advance of the East London Esau was his). He rejected Mearns' solutions as ineffective and suggested labour colonies as a measure which would allieviate both the housing problem and the threat of socialism.<sup>20</sup> In the second article Mearns himself entered the discussion which his pamphlet had initiated, taking this opportunity to reveal himself as its author. Mearns' conservative outlook now became clear. Although he believed that something might be done with sanitary laws and housing societies, the problem was fundamentally a moral one. Tens of thousands of slum dwellers were "utterly incorrigible" and the licensing laws



were "a prime cause of the almost hopeless condition" of many of the outcast poor.<sup>21</sup> Mearns' originality lay in his compelling descriptive powers, not in his analysis, and his contribution to the housing debate was at an end with the publication of The Bitter Cry.

By this time, however, concern about slum housing had spread beyond its immediate, humble origins in Mearns' penny pamphlet. On November 16th even The Times was forced to recognize the strength of public feeling, observing: "We have not, however, thought it right to join in an impulsive and uncalculating outcry that 'something must be done'." The Times warned its readers that many of the suggested remedies would prove worse than the disease and that behind contemporary calls for social reform often lay the dangerous idea of the state as the primary source of remedies for social evils.<sup>22</sup> Soon The Times began to publish letters on the subject covering the whole spectrum of contemporary opinion. They ranged from a letter urging compulsory purchase and rebuilding in London by the Metropolitan Board of Works to the opinion of one correspondent that slum dwellers would no longer present a problem if the state were "gently to coerce them out of an independence for which they are not fitted" and force them into "well-regulated common lodging houses."<sup>23</sup> There were many references to low wages which, it was felt, must be related in some way to poor housing conditions. Others,





reflecting the new awareness of events across the channel which contributed to the feeling of insecurity of Britain in the 1880's, wrote to describe the experiments in working-class housing in Paris and Mulhausen.<sup>24</sup> The Times also gave prominence to the setting up of the Mansion House Council in December which brought together prominent men to form a working party on the question (they included three future members of the Housing Commission: Cardinal Manning, the Bishop of Bedford and McCullagh Torrens).<sup>25</sup> There were reports of local groups in London which were springing up to consider the housing of the poor in their areas and there were also meetings in Liverpool to discuss the problem.<sup>26</sup> It was clear that the slum problem had captured the imagination of a large and diverse section of the population.

During this public discussion there was pressure on the Gladstone Government to sponsor an enquiry into working class housing, an idea first proposed by Lord Salisbury in his article in the National Review. Many recognized that while there was concern and a plethora of suggested causes and remedies, there was almost no factual information available apart from the limited, personal experiences of individual philanthropists. Before Charles Booth's survey (published 1886-1903), the slums were indeed uncharted territory. The sanitary campaign earlier in the century had demonstrated the power of facts in the service of reform; it was hoped that the results of an objective, wide-ranging enquiry would indicate a path through confusion and con-



troversy. This optimism was based on the belief that the facts themselves would point to a solution.<sup>27</sup>

It was thus with general approval that Lord Salisbury rose to propose the appointment of "a Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes in Populous Places" in the House of Lords on February 22, 1884. His speech followed on a discussion of the war in the Sudan (General Gordon had just been sent out to Khartoum and the surrender of Tokar had been announced) and Salisbury, whose name was to be associated chiefly with foreign affairs, began by begging attention for "a subject exceeding in importance and gravity even the terrible and deplorable tidings which have just been laid before the House." Salisbury felt that, in calling for a Royal Commission, he did not need to justify the proposal: the publicity the problem had received that winter had convinced everyone of its importance. Again Salisbury stressed the complexity of the matter, but this time he clearly singled out overcrowding as the central factor, the "great and peculiar evil" which other improvements only exaggerated. It was in this area that there was least information. What were the facts about overcrowding? This was the sort of question a Royal Commission could try to answer. Catching sight of Lord Wemyss, who was head of the Liberty and Property Defence League (an organization formed in 1882 to fight the creeping power of the state and the erosion of individualism), Lord Salisbury was reminded



that the charge of socialism might be levelled against him. He anticipated this criticism in a phrase indicative of his political philosophy. While he opposed wild schemes of state interference, he believed "there are no absolute truths or opinions in politics." Both moral and self-interest in this case dictated a concern for the welfare of the community.<sup>28</sup>

This forceful yet reasoned speech was well received. Several Lords spoke in its support and even Lord Wemyss was temporarily disarmed. Lord Carrington (representing the Local Government Board) announced the Government's decision to appoint a Royal Commission on the lines suggested by Lord Salisbury, only omitting the words "Populous Places" from the title for fear of discouraging rural improvements.<sup>29</sup> The Prince of Wales rose to express his deep interest in the subject in "the only speech of substance" he ever made as a member of the House of Lords.<sup>30</sup> He was happy to reveal that he would be a member of the Commission.<sup>31</sup>

A tentative list of those who would be asked to serve on the Commission had already been drawn up. Sir Charles Dilke was appointed Chairman in his capacity as head of the Local Government Board. The choice of members was largely his responsibility, as was the conducting of the hearings and the marshalling of witnesses.<sup>32</sup> Dilke had already been acclaimed for his efforts to gain first-hand knowledge of slum conditions and his attempts to stir the moribund local sanitary authorities into life. He had



become a particular favourite of Punch, which pictured Dilke and the Queen together "nipping communism in the bud." Another cartoon, "The Bitter Cry of Bumbledom," applauded the memoranda the Local Government Board had circulated to the local authorities that winter reminding them of the powers they possessed under the various sanitary and housing acts.<sup>33</sup> Dilke was well known at this period as a member of Gladstone's Cabinet, and for his radical views and close friendship with Joseph Chamberlain. His thinking on social questions was too far advanced for many in the Liberal Party and for many of his colleagues on the Commission, but he was a skillful and alert chairman and held the group together. The Royal Commission on Housing was one of the last achievements of Dilke's public life, for the final Report was published just before the scandal of the Crawford divorce case tragically removed him from the political scene.

The group of men assembled under Dilke was justifiably regarded as exceptionally distinguished.<sup>34</sup> The number of well-known and busy men who were willing to serve is an indication of the urgency with which people regarded the problem. The involvement of the Prince of Wales is an illustration of this concern. He did not usually pay great attention to social issues, but the housing question had aroused his genuine interest; he had even paid an incognito visit to the slums in the company of Lord Carrington. The Prince's attendance at the Commission's hearing was regular





and attentive till family matters called him away.<sup>35</sup> But he was not equipped to make any substantial contribution and his presence can probably be regarded as symbolic.

Lord Salisbury's name added further prestige to the list, although he also took an active part throughout. When Salisbury became Prime Minister many urgent social questions were neglected, but during the mid-80's his interest in the slum problem was neither superficial nor temporary as his National Review article, his work for the Commission and his sponsorship of the 1885 Housing Act all testify. Salisbury was an empirically-minded Conservative whose paternalistic approach led him to recognize the need to improve the condition of the poor. Though he was no democrat, in a sense he was one of the more "radical" members of the Commission, because he was more ready to consider departures from economic orthodoxy. Dilke quotes an occasion when one of Salisbury's proposals was greeted by Broadhurst (the working-class member) with the horrified exclamation, "Why, that is socialism!" Dilke himself thought that Lord Salisbury's suggestions were "valuable, and still throw much light on his temporary Radicalism, which unfortunately soon wore off." However, when it came to implementation Salisbury's proposals were hedged around with so many safeguards that they were virtually inoperative.<sup>36</sup>

Lord Shaftesbury was an aristocrat of a very different sort. He was born one year after the beginning of the



century and was now nearing the end of a lifetime devoted to the victims of Victorian England. Shaftesbury was perhaps the best-known philanthropist of his age, but his greatest achievements belonged to a world far removed from the 1880's. The legislation for which he is known (including the Lodging Houses Acts of 1851) was drawn up in the context of a society more individualistic, more confident and more blatant in its cruelty. Shaftesbury, inspired in all he did by his austere Evangelical faith, "personified the conscience of his age, the early Victorian age."<sup>37</sup> The assumptions of that age, partly exemplified by Shaftesbury's Fortnightly Review article, "The Mischief of State Aid," seemed quite inadequate in the mid-80's. Although Shaftesbury's achievements had not been forgotten and his experience was still valued and although he was appointed to the Commission and stood as first witness, his place in the list of members was chiefly that of a symbol of philanthropy and a revered survivor of an earlier age.

Cardinal Manning was one of the first people to be approached by Dilke when it was decided to set up a Royal Commission. Dilke had been friendly with the Cardinal for some time and knew of his intense interest in the condition of the rural labourers and in the urban poor, among whom were many Roman Catholics.<sup>38</sup> Manning had long shown a concern for the housing problem and at the time of the agitation over The Bitter Cry he wrote to Dilke:



Without a high-handed executive nothing will be done until another generation is morally destroyed...Some of my parishes are so crowded owing to the destruction without construction as to reproduce the same mischiefs in new places. You know I am no narrow politician, but I am impatient with political conflicts while these social plagues are destroying our people.<sup>39</sup>

Manning was never a "red" Cardinal; his social philosophy was defined within the limits of his era and social class. But there is evidence that his thinking was free of some of the orthodoxies which crippled the Victorian social conscience. Dilke, one of the most radical members of the Commission, wrote that "Cardinal Manning is our only revolutionary," and described his ideas as vast and impractical. It must be added that these "revolutionary" ideas consisted of removing prisons from the centre of London to free the land for housing and resiting noxious factories on the outskirts of cities.<sup>40</sup>

The Anglican and Nonconformist churches were also represented on the Commission in the persons of the Bishop of Bedford and the Congregationalist millionaire and philanthropist (and also Liberal M.P.) Samuel Morley. The Bishop of Bedford, William Walsham How, had personal knowledge of slum London for he was, as a suffragan of the Bishop of London, effectively Bishop of the East End and his duties consisted of overseeing the work of the Church in that area. He had also spent some years in East End parishes. Samuel Morley was also absorbed in the work of





his church and most of his numerous benefactions went to Nonconformist causes. Although his interests broadened somewhat in the last years of his life (he died in 1886), his social thinking was on the whole guided by the moral precepts of conservative Victorian Nonconformity.<sup>41</sup> His interest in the temperance movement came to the fore during the hearings of the Housing Commission; he declared in a speech in 1884 that as a member of the Commission he had been struck with the evidence "which showed that by far the greatest part of the misery of the poor was traceable to drink."<sup>42</sup> The inclusion of prominent churchmen among the Commissioners was probably to some extent a recognition of the work being undertaken by all denominations in slum areas, as the Pall Mall suggested.<sup>43</sup>

Like Lord Shaftesbury, Sir Richard Assheton Cross and William McCullagh Torrens were the initiators of earlier housing legislation. Cross was a Conservative M.P. and one-time head of the Home Office and he had chaired the 1881-1882 Parliamentary Select Committee.<sup>44</sup> Torrens was a Liberal M.P. who had been actively interested in education and other social questions.<sup>45</sup> Although the two men were opposed in party political affiliation, the acts they sponsored were complementary in effect, seeking to improve or, if necessary, demolish slum property. Not unnaturally these earlier achievements tended to prejudice their outlook; Cross particularly made frequent references to "my Act"



when interviewing witnesses and attempted to prove that all that was needed was the strengthening of existing legislation.

Henry Broadhurst was named to the Commission as a representative (in the words of the Pall Mall Gazette) of <sup>46</sup> "the towns' workmen." Broadhurst had been a mason; he had helped build with his own hands the Houses of Parliament, where he now sat as one of the first working class M.P.s. He was a prominent Trade Unionist and at this period held the post of Parliamentary Secretary of the T.U.C.<sup>47</sup> But Broadhurst's belief in self-help, his neglect of the low-paid, casual workers, his loyalty to the Liberal Party, his "Uncle Tomism," were all subject to growing criticism within the labour movement in the changed atmosphere of the 1880's. Broadhurst did not speak for the slum population but, like Glazier who had written in the Fortnightly Review, for the skilled artisan who wanted to buy his own home. Middle class radicals like Dilke and Collings, even the benevolent aristocrat Lord Salisbury, spoke for the poor "towns' workmen" better than Broadhurst did.

Jesse Collings was a Radical Liberal, a friend and political ally of Chamberlain. The Pall Mall Gazette implied that he, like Broadhurst, was a representative of the working class by describing his mother as an "agricultural peasant." In fact Collings had begun his working life as a tradesman, like his father, and was now a substantial member



of the Birmingham middle class. He owed his place on the Commission to his connexion with Birmingham urban reform (he had been mayor of Birmingham) and his interest in the condition of agricultural labourers, whom he had championed as secretary of the National Labourers' Union.<sup>48</sup> Another member of the Commission, Earl Brownlow, sat (again in the words of the Pall Mall Gazette) as a representative of rural property.<sup>49</sup> Lord Carrington was spokesman for the Local Government Board in the House of Lords. George Godwin, an architect and journalist, had made a reputation earlier in the century for his writing on urban sanitation and slum conditions. One of his publications, anticipating The Bitter Cry by thirty years, was called London Shadows.<sup>50</sup> George Goschen was a city banker who had served under Gladstone as a Liberal M.P. for many years and was for a time President of the Poor Law Board. By the mid-80's he was becoming increasingly uneasy in the Liberal Party (he later became a Liberal-Unionist, though he had little in common with Chamberlain and his associates). Goschen's thinking on social questions was dictated by a belief in private enterprise and personal independence.<sup>51</sup>

Lyulph Stanley was also a Liberal M.P., deeply interested in state education but apparently with no special concern with housing.<sup>52</sup> He proved to be a conscientious but often tedious and difficult member. Dilke's biographers suggest that Dilke had planned to appoint



Stanley's sister Maude, who was an active philanthropist in slum London, and that Lyulph Stanley was appointed as her representative. The reason Miss Stanley could not represent herself was, of course, because she was a woman. The same difficulty arose when Octavia Hill's name was suggested. She was acknowledged as the leading authority on the housing of the poor; but no woman had ever sat on a Royal Commission before and Lord Harcourt, a member of the Cabinet, refused to add his signature to the Report if a woman were appointed.<sup>53</sup> The Pall Mall Gazette indicated, in any case, that it had been decided to use experts with special knowledge as witnesses rather than Commissioners.<sup>54</sup> Octavia Hill was probably more useful in that capacity; despite her immense knowledge and experience her mind was firm, not to say dogmatic, on both the general principles and the minute details of working-class housing. There is no doubt she would have brought a closed mind to the subject as a Commissioner.

Two final members of the Royal Commission, Dwyer Gray (an Irish M.P.) and Sir George Harrison (Lord Provost of Edinburgh), were co-opted later for their special knowledge of Scotland and Ireland. Dwyer Gray, however, made a significant contribution early in the enquiry. A Dublin journalist and local politician as well as a Home Rule M.P. (Queen Victoria was far from happy about his appointment), Dwyer Gray was deeply interested in the problems of public





health and the welfare of the poor.<sup>55</sup> Although he was hostile to socialism, the memorandum he added to the Report on England and Wales included one of the most radical proposals to appear in the Commission's volumes.

The members of the Housing Commission represented a wide cross-section of late Victorian middle and upper-class opinion. Altogether Dilke was satisfied. "Completed my Royal Commission," he wrote, "with fewer fools on it than is usual."<sup>56</sup> Once the membership and the terms of reference had been decided upon there remained one difficulty: the perplexing question of who was to take precedence at meetings of the Royal Commission, after the Prince of Wales, whether Lord Salisbury as a Peer of the Realm or Cardinal Manning as a Prince of the Roman Catholic Church. It was finally decided that the Cardinal should come first.<sup>57</sup> With this matter out of the way, the Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes was ready to hold its first session.



### CHAPTER III

#### THE HOUSING OF THE WORKING CLASSES: THE COMMISSION EVIDENCE

The Royal Commission enjoined to "enquire into the housing of the working classes" by calling witnesses, examining books and records and by personal visits<sup>1</sup> began to hear evidence in March 1884. The Commission met twice a week during Parliamentary sessions and spent the Spring and Summer examining evidence on working-class housing in England (though the word Wales appears in the official title, Merthyr Tydfil was the only Welsh town included; the Commission was almost entirely concerned with English conditions). During the Autumn session and the period before Easter, supplementary evidence was heard and the Report was drafted. By Easter 1885 the two volumes on England and Wales, one containing the Report and Recommendations, the other containing the Evidence, were ready. The large, closely printed volume of evidence comprised by far the most detailed and wide-ranging survey of working-class housing then available. Over a hundred witnesses were examined, including most of the contemporary experts on housing and representatives of almost every interest and point of view. There were well-known personalities like Octavia Hill and Joseph Chamberlain, clergymen, sanitary inspectors, landlords and builders, even one or two more



prosperous members of the working class.

On the whole the evidence was gathered efficiently and intelligently. Only occasionally did the Commissioners stray aside and lose themselves in the complexities of the Great Eastern Railway timetable or the Cornish three-lives lease system (the culprit was usually Lyulph Stanley). But the Commission was hampered throughout by a lack of precise information and reliable statistics. A start had been made with the extension of government and administration earlier in the century, for example in the work of the Medical Officers of Health, but there were still enormous gaps in the information available. Much of the evidence presented to the Commission was based on conjecture and, inevitably, prejudice. It was often not known, for example, how many people had been displaced in a particular demolition scheme, where they had gone, or how many of them had stayed in the neighborhood to crowd the remaining houses. Evidence on the rent structure in several towns was given by clergymen, who were often the most knowledgable people available. It was difficult to come to a real understanding of the situation when so much depended on individual opinions. Lyulph Stanley remarked that he believed the proportion of destructive tenants was small, to which Octavia Hill retorted "I am very glad you think so....I am afraid it is a large part, and a very large part I should have said."<sup>2</sup> The lack of factual information was worst in London, which was





encumbered by its anachronistic and fragmented system of government. Cardinal Manning was referring to London when he voiced his frustration at the absence of hard facts: "At present we seem to be a little in the dark....There have been examinations made of witnesses respecting various sites [where housing conditions were especially bad]...but I do not know that as yet we have got a complete map before us of all those sites, or any estimate of the number of people living on those sites."<sup>3</sup> Ten years after this Royal Commission Beatrice Webb attacked the method by which government enquiries proceeded: the system of formal hearings, the mass of oral evidence, the absence of statistics and memoranda from experts.<sup>4</sup> But since there was little factual data available, there was no better way for the Housing Commission to collect its evidence.

The Commissioners' task was also made difficult (though they were hardly aware of it) by the ambiguous use of the key term "working classes." During the hearings the words were often used, usually in the plural, interchangeably with the word "poor."<sup>5</sup> This was common practice at the time, and all too often the poor and the working class were the same people, as the surveys of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree were to show.<sup>6</sup> Even men in regular work often went hungry and lived with their families in one room. But "poor" often meant in contemporary parlance the improvident or unfortunate slum dweller



without regular work; it was a term heavy with moral overtones. A full understanding of the housing problem demanded precise terminology; evidence referring to a Building Society which catered for working men earning more than thirty shillings a week was irrelevant to the situation of the "hard-working and industrious people," described by Lord William Compton, who were crowded into Clerkenwell tenements, or the plight of the "'appy dosser" who spent the night on the stairs.<sup>7</sup>

In fact the Commission was primarily concerned with the middle group, which in Booth's classification was to figure as B, C and D--casual labourers and regular workers whose earnings were very small.<sup>8</sup> It was taken for granted that their housing presented the most serious problem. The Commissioners ignored Booth's group A, "the lowest," the drifting population of the common lodging houses. They were also very little interested in the kind of artisan who could afford to save with a Building Society. But the Commission never defined their terms or sought to analyse the categories they used. The contemporary society lacked precise sociological concepts. The result for the Housing Commission was a certain confusion and distortion in the understanding of the problem and the possible solutions.

The procedure for hearing the evidence is set out in the first few pages of the Report. First the relevant legislation was ascertained, then the Commission turned to



London. The section on London is in many ways the most interesting and important part of the evidence. The initial public outcry had arisen in the autumn of 1883 over a pamphlet describing London slums, and conditions were generally assumed to be worst there. This was probably true, at least as far as overcrowding was concerned. Many housing questions were focused on London: the role of the model dwellings and philanthropy, overcrowding, the suburbs. Some of the Commissioners had personal knowledge of the London slums and several, including Dilke and the Prince of Wales, had paid special visits to the worst areas. There was a whole range of witnesses, including school inspectors, sanitary officials, the police, vestrymen, readily available to give evidence. The London evidence was gathered over a wide area and in depth; a district extending from Marylebone to Clerkenwell, thought to contain working class dwellings, was examined in greater detail than was possible with the whole of London or other parts of the country.

After London, evidence was taken in more cursory fashion from several provincial cities including Birmingham, Bristol, Newcastle and Liverpool. Exeter and Doncaster were taken as representative towns of medium size and Camborne, in Cornwall, and Alnwick, Northumberland, as representative small towns. A few days were spent considering rural housing, but the Report indicates that conditions in the country were seen by the Commissioners as a different



question, part of the larger subject of agricultural conditions. The question of urban housing was their concern; the phrase "populous places" had come near to being included in the Commission's title.

The first witness to be called was Lord Shaftesbury. His knowledge of London and London's destitute population extended over 60 years and he gave his opinion that although in some ways the living conditions of the poorest had improved since the earlier part of the century, the overcrowding in London was worse.<sup>10</sup> The Commission was especially concerned with overcrowding. It was seen as "the centre evil around which most of the others group themselves,"<sup>11</sup> and this approach was a major step forward in understanding the housing problem. Every witness who gave evidence on housing conditions was closely examined about overcrowding. The facts were often appalling. It was common everywhere to find a whole family and sometimes a lodger living and sleeping in one room. This was true not only in cities like Newcastle, where the majority of working class families were said to be living in one or two-roomed tenements, or in London or Liverpool, but also in the little country towns of Camborne and Alnwick. Overcrowding was serious even where housing had been built expressly for the industrial population; the one and two-bedroom terrace "cottages" were totally inadequate for the large families of the period. In older areas a house built for one





middle-class family and abandoned as the social status of the neighbourhood declined, would be subdivided and the rooms let individually. When the process was complete and the area had become a slum, families of six, seven and eight might be living in each room, with one or two sleeping on the stairs.

Lisson Grove was one area that had undergone this transformation in the preceeding seventy years; Clerkenwell was another. Lord William Compton described how the houses built there by his ancestor as desirable suburban residences had descended through the social scale until now the skilled craftsmen were giving way to unskilled day labourers who were packed even more tightly than their predecessors into the delapidated Regency houses. Naturally the sanitary arrangements that had been thought adequate for a single family 70 years before were now completely unsatisfactory. Even light and air were scarcer, for courtyards and gardens had been built on as the pressure of population and the financial returns to landlords increased. Despite the effort that had been made to prohibit the inhabitation of underground cellars and kitchens, several witnesses knew of people still living in such places. The practice of letting the corners of rooms to separate families, not uncommon earlier in the century, seemed to have disappeared. However, the Commission was told of lodging houses inhabited by Italians (who shared with



European Jews an ignominious status as immigrants in the late nineteenth century) where each family shared a bed and there were several beds in a room.<sup>12</sup>

The physical consequences of overcrowding were of great concern to the Commission, for it was generally accepted that fresh air, and plenty of it, was necessary for health and bodily efficiency. It was also assumed that disease spread more rapidly in crowded conditions, though the germ theory had not yet gained universal acceptance. Death-rate figures were produced to support these assumptions and the high incidence of opthalmia among slum children was referred to on several occasions. Local bye-laws set up a crude standard in terms of cubic feet of air per person which indicated some understanding of the harmful effects of overcrowding, although often the standard remained unenforced.<sup>13</sup>

The moral consequences of overcrowding troubled the Commissioners as deeply as the physical ones. They recognized that where there was serious overcrowding it was impossible for a woman to keep the cosy and orderly home that middle class Victorians prized so highly as the source of piety and the domestic virtues.<sup>14</sup> Modesty could not develop where a whole family lived in one room or where adult children of different sexes shared a bedroom, sometimes together with a lodger. One phrase in Mearns' pamphlet, "incest is common," had shocked public opinion



more than any other and many witnesses were questioned anxiously on this point. However, their evidence was conflicting and inconclusive. Conditions where several families had to share a lavatory were also troubling from the moral point of view, and this situation existed even in some of the model dwellings.

Overcrowding had other undesirable consequences, for it drove people out of their homes to seek relief in the pubs or in the streets. The relationship between drink and overcrowding was closely examined by the Commission. A man like Samuel Morley, the temperance enthusiast, sought to prove that drink was the root of the whole housing problem--indeed Morley often did prove this to his own satisfaction when he examined witnesses. If only the poor saved the money spent on drink, it was alleged, they could afford higher rents, better conditions and more houseroom (trips to the country and visits to the music-hall were also deemed unnecessary extravagances by such people). One witness declared: "I do not believe in the necessity of their living in a slum.... You can hardly ever find a teetotaler living in a slum." Others were more doubtful. The vicar of Spitalfields in East London, Robert C. Billings, was examined by Morley in the series of questions which he introduced as a coda into many of the hearings. Billings agreed that ideally the money saved by temperance could be spent on better housing, but at present this





was impossible: "You have not the habitations for them." He made the further point that drink and crowding interacted on one another. You could not simply attribute bad housing to drink "as if the overcrowding had nothing to do with the craving for stimulants."<sup>15</sup>

Some expressed the view, which finally found its way into the Commission Report, that the morals of those who lived in crowded conditions were on the whole better than might have been expected. Everyone seemed to assume that moral standards in the provinces were higher than in London, for their questions on this point to witnesses from other cities and towns were far less urgent. Jesse Collings was confident on this point. Things were bound to be better with "the comparatively primitive state in which people are in some parts" (he was referring to the Welsh mining valleys where the men would bath in the living room with apparently no evil consequences). It was different for the people in London "where they have all the vices of civilization to contend with."<sup>16</sup> Altogether the question of the morality of the working class was fraught with controversy, emotion and social tensions, and there was no possibility of substantial agreement.

The Commission was interested in the causes of overcrowding as well as in its physical and moral consequences. For historians, the rise in population seems the major factor. A slowly declining death rate and a very high urban birth rate of between 30 and 40 per



thousand produced a simple excess of births over deaths in this period of fourteen per thousand yearly. Most of this increase manifested itself in the town population.<sup>17</sup> This explanation was hardly mentioned during the Commission's hearings. The implication of the census figures for the cities was not recognized, and it was probably difficult to regard population increase in a negative light in an age of population rivalry between the European powers. The cause of overcrowding that was most frequently suggested to the Commission was demolition in city centres. In the nineteenth century civic pride and the demands of progress led to the construction of the Victoria Embankment, Victoria Street, Shaftesbury Avenue and the great railway stations in London, Corporation Street in Birmingham, Leeds Town Hall, and the classical and gothic railway stations and board schools and town halls throughout the country. But all these undertakings made necessary the destruction of courts, alleys, and tenements which had housed, however inadequately, many of the urban poor. Of course, those who were evicted were not consulted in these schemes, and they were in no position to voice their point of view.

Ironically, many of the "improvement schemes" (the nineteenth century term for urban renewal) had as one of their main objects the elimination of slum areas.<sup>18</sup> Birmingham's Corporation Street scheme, one of the best-known and most ambitious, was undertaken partly to destroy one of the



worst district in the city centre, to reduce disease and squalor and increase light and air, as well as civic dignity. There were also instances where the route for a railway line was influenced by a city corporation's views on areas that should be demolished. Incredibly, people had assumed that slums could be abolished permanently by pulling down the existing ones, that the evicted people would magically redistribute themselves over a wide area in cheap, convenient and spacious accommodation. A member of the 1882 Committee had asked Canon Barnett:

"It must be better for your population if the number were fewer?"

"But you do not abolish them, they still exist," Barnett retorted.

"It is like overcrowding in Ireland, they go where they are wanted?"

"They are not wanted anywhere except in this district."<sup>19</sup>

Two years later this type of thinking was by no means dead. The Medical Officer of Health for Hackney declared that it did not matter "one bit" to him or his local authority where people went once they had been turned out. His only objective was "to get rid of them where they are overcrowded."<sup>20</sup> But, as Barnett had said, these people did not disappear, as many local officials apparently hoped. There were no figures or precise evidence, but it was the



opinion of many clergymen and others who knew these areas well that evicted people rarely moved far; they stayed to increase the crowding in the immediate neighbourhood.<sup>21</sup>

There was some legislation which recognized the possibility that demolition for railways, civic schemes and slum clearance might involve the destruction of houses and thus cause hardship. Railway bills, for instance, included clauses which provided for the rehousing of people displaced by demolition. Although the obligation to rehouse had been reinforced in 1875, the Commission could not discover a single case where a railway company had rebuilt or provided alternative housing. The House of Lords Clerk of Bills explained how advantage was always taken of escape clauses, which in such words as "unless the Company and such persons otherwise agree" virtually cancelled out all legal obligation. Compensation to tenants was another obligation which the law attempted, not very forcefully, to impose on railway companies. To avoid this, the usual practice was to have tenants evicted by the landlord (who then received substantial compensation payments) before the company gained possession.<sup>22</sup> Even if the law on compensation to tenants had been followed to the letter, it would have done nothing to relieve the problem of overcrowding. It was never envisaged that the sums of money granted (from 5s. to £5) would be enough to provide a new house.

Local authorities avoided paying tenants' compensa-





tion or rehousing the evicted in similar ways. The Metropolitan Board of Works was one of the worst offenders. Under the Cross and Torrens Acts, which empowered local authorities to demolish slum property, rebuilding of working-class dwellings by the authority or under its direction was allowed, but not enforced, and very few places had followed the example of Liverpool in tentatively undertaking rehousing schemes. It had been hoped that once the sites became available, private enterprise would step in and erect working-class housing on a commercial basis. There was also the hope that the evicted would conveniently disappear. Neither solution had materialized. The Peabody Trust had built some model dwellings on a site belonging to the Metropolitan Board of Works, but these buildings usually housed fewer people and catered for a more prosperous class than the houses that had been demolished. Moreover, this undertaking had only been made possible because the Board had sold the land on special terms. This move would not have been considered had the applicant been a private builder. Other types of building (warehouses, offices, shops and public houses) were more profitable and less trouble to maintain than houses, so they were built when slum clearance freed valuable central sites.<sup>23</sup> It was an ironic fact that this destruction of housing took place under acts entitled "Artisans' and Labourers' Dwelling Acts" (the Torrens Acts) and "Artisans' Dwellings Im-



provement Acts" (the Cross Acts). The St. James' Gazette, referring to the Birmingham improvement scheme, noted that the class which the acts had been passed to help was in practice the one most injured by them. "Not one artisan's dwelling has been built out of the £800,000 which has been spent on the new street, and therefore...the wretched and unwholesome dwellings which still remain standing are overcrowded to a fearful extent."<sup>24</sup>

Most of the demolition which concerned the Commission was connected with municipal improvements and railways. These at any rate were symbols of progress as the nineteenth century saw it. But there were one or two cases where the landlord had been known to demolish houses, without replacing them, purely for his own convenience. These were in country towns where the returns for rents were not high, where there were no interested middlemen and where the local magnate was wealthy enough to disregard the few shillings cottage rents brought in. One witness alleged that in the area of Camborne, more cottages had been demolished than had been built in the years since 1876; cottage property was now considered to be uneconomic. In Alnwick, where there was serious overcrowding, the Duke of Northumberland, like a wicked pantomime landlord, had pulled down 78 cottages in order to extend his grounds and, in the words of his agent, "to improve the access to Alnwick from the northwest country." Only 61 of these cottages had been



replaced, 28 of them by working men themselves, and the new cottages housed a different (more "respectable") group of people than the old. Almost certainly they also housed a smaller number of people. "Can they be said to have been put up in lieu of those cottages that were pulled down?" the Duke's agent was asked, to which he replied: "I do not suppose the question ever arose."<sup>25</sup>

The Peabody Trust and other philanthropic societies also contributed to overcrowding through demolition. Time and again evidence was given that the model dwellings rarely housed anything approaching the number of families which had been evicted when the site was cleared. It is difficult to see how they could have done so without sacrificing their aim to provide comparatively airy, light and roomy buildings. But the housing societies rarely took as tenants the previous occupants of the site, who were the very poor and hence the most overcrowded. Thus slum clearance in any form, even to build model dwellings, in the absence of a housing policy only aggravated the situation.

The practice of taking lodgers, migration to the towns from the country, low wages, high rents, house-farmers: these were some of the other suggestions put forward to explain the chronic overcrowding. Rents in London were sometimes 4s.6d. for a single room (a labourer in regular work might earn £1 a week) and in a survey of one area, conducted by the School Board, it was found that 46% of the





inhabitants were paying from one half to one quarter of their wages in rent. In Bristol, where wages were lower, the rent for a room was usually between 1s.6d. and 3s. In Newcastle, according to one clergyman, people were paying more for an underground kitchen (used as a living and sleeping room, which was forbidden by law) than they would in London.<sup>26</sup> Wages were pitifully low. It is difficult to see how a woman earning perhaps 10s. a week as a seamstress managed to afford anything for rent; and there was no security for the poor against old age and sickness. But low wages, like high rents, were symptoms rather than causes. Some of the Commissioners dimly perceived the real housing problem; "Why does the law of supply and demand not work?" wondered Lord Salisbury.<sup>27</sup> Neither philanthropists, administrators nor Royal Commissioners fully appreciated that the main cause of overcrowding was a shortage of the right type of housing. There was nothing in the present system to ensure an adequate supply, so there were not enough houses for working class people.

One cause of overcrowding which the Commissioners investigated thoroughly was the high demand for housing in the centre of cities. Although the population of a few central areas was declining as business districts began to form, the most overcrowded streets and houses were still in the heart of towns. The expanding suburbs were providing an escape from the inconveniences (and pleasures) of city



life for middle-class families. But the poor--the dockers and building labourers, the costermongers and artisans in the smaller trades--remained apparently trapped in the centre. This situation perplexed the Commissioners considerably; the suburbs were so obviously preferable, and now there were all these convenient workmen's trains. Witnesses were urged to comment on the crowding in city centres and to suggest reasons for it. Several pointed out that casual labourers must live in the centre if they were to get a chance of employment, and there was work there for women and children. Builders and girls making artificial flowers were cited as specific examples. There were also the dockers who fought at the dock gates every morning to be taken on, an image which was thrust before the public five years later during the great dock strike. It was also suggested that the poor did not move out of the centre because there was nowhere cheaper for them to go. Though one room in the centre of town was expensive, the rent was less than that of a whole cottage further out, if one could be found. The fare from London suburbs to the city centre was at least 1s. a week, an impossible sum for many. Food and clothing was likely to be dearer in the suburbs than in the Saturday night street markets. One witness suggested that people stayed in the area where they were known in order to retain their credit, which was an essential feature of many family budgets, in the local shops. <sup>28</sup>

Many witnesses noted a deeper reluctance among



poorer working class people and among what was variously called the "substratum" or the "destructive class" to move from their home areas, a reluctance which could not be explained on economic grounds. "I suppose they are accustomed to live there....They do not like change." The poor liked the sociable life of the slums; they had not been "educated up to something better."<sup>29</sup> This kind of thinking was linked to the idea that the poor positively enjoyed living six to a room. Even the more enlightened witnesses had little sympathy and understanding for the reluctance to move among the poor, the wish to stay where one was known, where one's friends and relatives lived, where there was the colour and drama of street life and the security of familiar surroundings. All the evidence presented to the Housing Commission indicates that the rest of society was hostile, or at least unsympathetic, to people below the ranks of the labour aristocracy. It does not seem surprising that, in the words of Octavia Hill, they tried to stay together, supported one another and "took the 'poor thing' tone too much" when confronted with change.<sup>30</sup>

This concern with slums in city centres was part of the increasing awareness among late Victorians of the changing structure of their cities. It was predominantly the professionals and the white collar workers who were moving out into the suburbs which had been spreading out from the city centres since the early years of the century.<sup>31</sup>



The suburbs tended to be one class communities: Highgate, for example, remained in the hands of the upper middle class while Camberwell, which had been a wealthy district, moved through the social spectrum till by 1900 North Camberwell had become a working class area.<sup>32</sup> Enfield and Edmonton, in north east London, were unusual in being built expressly for the working class. Though these late Victorian and Edwardian suburbs have now taken on a certain charm, it is difficult to see them in the same light as their contemporaries. They were built without regard for town planning, social and cultural life, or the conservation of natural beauty. The dream that society can escape the problems of urban life by mass exodus into the suburbs is now shown to be a terrible fallacy. But for late Victorian society the suburbs were a panacea, a wonderful solution to all the moral, social and sanitary problems the modern city seemed to produce. "The most beautiful things that I ever saw," Lord Shaftesbury enthused.<sup>33</sup> During the Commission's hearings, Lyulph Stanley introduced the only doubtful note into the general approval of suburban development. He was concerned that the new suburbs should not deteriorate into slums.<sup>34</sup> We now know that this process was already taking place in at least one area: Sultan Street in Camberwell.<sup>35</sup>

The Commissioners eagerly examined witnesses who could present evidence on the suburbs and the working classes. They were anxious to see the poorer town dwellers





benefitting from the healthy, spacious suburbs and there was some anxiety about the isolation of the poor in the older central areas. In fact, it seems clear that this "ghetto" situation was "a corollary to the rise of the middle class suburbs"<sup>36</sup> and that one function of the new residential areas was to develop and maintain one class communities. It is also probable that the suburban building boom absorbed any financial and material resources that might have been spent on working class houses in this period.<sup>37</sup> None of this was apparent to the Commissioners, as their bemused questions on overcrowding in city centres indicate. There was a great interest in the Artisans' Labourers' and General Dwellings Company, a philanthropic body which had experimented with estates of suburban cottages in London, Birmingham and Lancashire.

Many late Victorians had great hopes for the success of the workmen's trains, which had been made compulsory on certain lines under the Cheap Trains Act of 1883. These trains left the working class suburbs early in the morning, around six o'clock, and returned in the early evening at a standard fare of 1d. each way. The General Manager of the Great Eastern Railway Company, which served the East London suburbs, seemed to regard the workmen's trains an unmitigated evil. His main objection was to the habits of the passengers, their "rough, boisterous way," their custom of "expectorating all over the station and smoking very much



with short black pipes." Moreover, he asserted, "wherever you locate workmen in large numbers, you utterly destroy that neighbourhood for ordinary passenger traffic." He even went so far as to urge the formal demarcation of certain areas as working class suburbs. This would be of enormous advantage to the Great Eastern Railway Company and, he added as an afterthought, to the general public as well. No other witness took this extreme line (though in practice a similar system was evolving) and the Commissioners were certainly not inclined to adopt it. The Chairman of the Metropolitan Railway Company believed no great harm was done to the other passenger traffic by workmen's trains, and he maintained that they were a profitable service. The fact that the railway companies ran many more workmen's trains than were required under law seemed to bear this out.<sup>38</sup>

The workmen's trains were probably useful in solving the housing problem of some working men who could afford to rent a little suburban house but not the regular train fare, though some found work near their new homes in the old villages around which the suburbs developed. On the other hand, the Secretary to the Railway Department at the Board of Trade believed there was no evidence that the presence of workmen's trains encouraged the growth of cheaper suburban housing. Nor could he give any assurance that such trains would be provided if cheaper suburbs were built; he did not think that the initiative lay with the Board of Trade.<sup>39</sup> The



Commissioners pressed this point, for they wished to see suburban growth facilitated wherever possible. It was hard not to become intoxicated at the thought of cheap, convenient (many of the workmen's trains were in fact extremely inconvenient) trains transporting thousands daily from leafy suburbs to their work in the city centres. The Commissioners were brought down to earth by Octavia Hill, who reminded them that the housing conditions of the very poor, whose need was most severe, could not be remedied in this way, at least for the time being. The workmen's trains, she said, were useless "to the entire class of people among whom I work."<sup>40</sup> For reasons that have already been discussed, they would have to be housed in the centre.

Though overcrowding was the "central evil" in the eyes of the Commission, there were many others. Despite the efforts of Chadwick and other crusaders for sanitary reform, the work of conscientious Officers of Health and increasing knowledge about public health, many families were without a proper water supply or sanitary facilities. London, as usual, was worst off. The Medical Officer for Hackney described the uncertain state of the water supply in his area. The water companies were not obliged to provide an adequate supply in Hackney (the water supply was already publicly owned in more progressive towns and cities) and they had declined to do so while the local authority refused to guarantee them a fixed return. New



bye-laws to remedy this situation were being drawn up. Another London Medical Officer told of a magistrate who fined a man the derisory sum of 1d. a day for keeping a house he owned short of water for 50 days.<sup>41</sup> Standards of what constituted an adequate water supply were not high. Octavia Hill, the most respected authority on working class housing, declared: "Primarily I should not carry the water and drains all over the place...If you have water on every floor, that is sufficient for working people. It is no hardship to have to carry a pail of water along a flat surface."<sup>42</sup> "Water on every floor" of a block of dwellings would indeed have been a luxury for many. In Merthyr Tydfil there was little pure water, though plenty soaking through the sandstone walls and floors, and sanitary facilities were also inadequate: the local authority had recently put up a closet at the end of each row of houses in a district where there had been none at all before. Eighty people were reported to be sharing a closet in one area of Newcastle.<sup>43</sup>

Air was a second element that middle-class Victorians had learnt to value. The Commission found it lacking in many houses. There were a large number of back-to-back houses surviving from the earlier part of the century; indeed some were still being built (they were not banned until 1909). But perhaps the worst ventilated houses were to be found in Liverpool where there were courts consisting of five houses, built back-to-





back, facing one another across a ten or twelve foot alley. The alley was blocked at one end and approached at the other through a tunnel. In Liverpool as elsewhere building regulations had been made more strict and such courts had been banned in the city since 1846; however over 2,000 remained.<sup>44</sup> Health officials and the informed public had a horror of cul-de-sacs because of the lack of through ventilation and because it was thought (as Booth's poverty maps were to prove) that such areas tended to become slums. This dislike of cul-de-sacs was endorsed by the Commission. "We must get the stream of public opinion running through," cried Lyulph Stanley.<sup>45</sup> There was some suggestion that the poor were opposed to the fresh air which more enlightened people valued, that the poor were "far more afraid of air than people of a higher social grade."<sup>46</sup> Now and again the more imaginative explanation was offered that where people were badly fed and clothed, and where fuel was expensive, the dread of open windows and fresh breezes was not unnatural.

There were instances given of cellar dwellings still inhabited and places where the drains ran just beneath the floorboards. Elsewhere large cracks in the walls were covered with a piece of canvas; the rent was often raised to cover such "repairs." The urban death rate throughout the country was around 20 per thousand, but in the worst areas of Merthyr Tydfil it reached 37 and in Alnwick, a country



town, the death rate for 1883 was 32 per thousand. Typhus and smallpox were said to be endemic even in some of the newer areas in Newcastle.<sup>47</sup> Conditions had certainly improved since the days when Chadwick and Engels had written on life in Britain's towns, but much remained to shock the Commissioners, with their higher expectations and greater knowledge of sanitary science. From the evidence they concluded: "It is quite certain that the working classes are largely housed in dwellings which would be unsuitable even if they were not overcrowded."<sup>48</sup>

With their belief that housing could be improved through reforms in the existing housing structure, the Commissioners took a great interest in the role of the landlord, the different types of leases, and the relation between tenant, middleman and landlord. They were hopeful that great things could be achieved if landlords were persuaded of their moral responsibility (Octavia Hill's work, too, was based on this hope), and they spent a great deal of time examining Lord William Compton, who had apparently undergone such a conversion. He was the Marquess of Northampton's heir and in the previous few months, probably influenced by the Bitter Cry agitation, he had taken a great interest in his father's Clerkenwell property. Both he and the Dickensian manager of the estates, Henry Trelawny Boodle, declared that their aim was to get rid of the middlemen. They also expressed great dislike of the lease-



hold system, whereby control of the property passed out of the hands of the ground landlord. The subletting and subdividing of rented property among a hierarchy of landlords and rent collectors, a practice then known as house-farming, was common in the poorer districts, where these middlemen made enormous profits. A School Board visitor told the Commission that tenants often knew only the name of the rent collector. It was difficult to see how to get rid of middlemen while so many landlords remained unrepentant.

Men like Boodle and Lord William Compton were, understandably, in favour of large landlords. There was certainly evidence that substantial landowners were sometimes model landlords, but opinion was not unanimous. Clerkenwell vestrymen alleged that Lord Northampton's estates were not well managed, that they had been entirely neglected before the recent outcry and that there was "virtually a collusion" between landlords and leaseholders in the neighbourhood.<sup>49</sup> It was difficult to decide on the facts in this particular case, but the argument of the landlords seemed to be that the tenants should rely for good housing on noblesse oblige. As experience in Alnwick showed, benevolence was no more an innate characteristic of aristocratic magnates than of the more humble landlords. Jesse Collings was shocked at the idea that great landlords "would allow the wellbeing of the poorer people who are compelled by the necessities of their existence to live in



that area to depend upon the goodwill of the landlord."<sup>50</sup> Discussion of landlords and leases was extended to an examination of the leasehold system in Cornwall. There it was common practice to fix the lease to the lifetime of three tenants. This method produced great misery and uncertainty (a pamphlet had been circulated entitled The Bitter Cry of Cornish Leaseholders) and it was also held to be a discouragement to building and investment in housing.<sup>51</sup>

In view of the terrible conditions which the evidence had revealed there was some anxiety about discontent among the poor. People should of course want better housing, but this must not be allowed to grow into political feeling or a wider sense of dissatisfaction with the established order. One or two alarming pieces of evidence were given. Manning asked the Reverend Andrew Mearns whether the housing conditions of the poor in the East End of London "makes them very susceptible on the subject of rich and poor and so on...and...takes a political form in the more educated among them?" Mearns replied: "It does so undoubtedly."<sup>52</sup> Unrest seemed to be particularly prevalent in the East End. The Reverend Mr. Billing of Spitalfields believed people were becoming more aware of the contrasts between rich and poor and were not prepared to accept their poverty as a permanent condition.<sup>53</sup> A landowner's agent from Camborne blamed Broadhurst for a recent outbreak of discontent there: "Mr. Broadhurst came





down a few months ago and stirred up the people." It appeared that Broadhurst (who was certainly no revolutionary) had been talking about the enfranchisement of leaseholders.<sup>54</sup> On the whole, however, there seemed to be less vocal discontent than might have been feared, although there was some evidence that fear of reprisals from landlords was keeping some people quiet. There was no danger of concerted working class action on the housing question. For the Commissioners this in itself was an argument for reform and improvement, before dissatisfaction grew and took on a more dangerous character.

The plan of evidence of the Royal Commission had stated that once the facts about working class housing had been ascertained, qualified people would be examined on the possible remedies. In practice, it proved impossible to separate solutions from statements of fact in the examination of witnesses. Suggestions for reforms were scattered through the evidence and the examination of an expert on a particular problem led inevitably to a consideration of what could be done to remedy it. The ideas put forward were many and varied. There were few indisputable facts and little consensus on moral and social priorities, though certain limitations (on the extent of government interference and initiative, for instance) were presupposed when suggestions were made.

The Commissioners were anxious to find out how



legislation now on the statute books operated. These laws represented remedies tried in the past; the Commission could recommend amendments or new laws if this seemed necessary. It was clear from the evidence presented to the Commission and the Select Committee of 1882 (with which all the Commissioners, especially Dilke, were familiar) that the results of legislation had in most cases been disappointing. The Torrens Act was among the more successful attempts to deal with the slums, given the nineteenth century assumptions. This was the Act which applied to small groups of houses and was to be administered by local sanitary boards, which in London meant the vestries and District Boards. Though the Act had rarely led to rebuilding, the Commission was told of cases where it had been used to close or demolish unhealthy houses. Octavia Hill declared that without the Torrens Act she could not have undertaken her work.<sup>55</sup> But there was more evidence of places where the local authority had failed to put this Act into practice. The Cross Act, which applied to larger areas, had met with even less success. The most spectacular scheme undertaken through the procedures set up under the Cross Act was in Birmingham; few other authorities had the desire for the resources to put this legislation into effect or, where they had done so, to repeat the experiment.<sup>56</sup> There was evidence, in the discussion of demolition, that where the Cross and Torrens Acts had been used the result almost in-



variably had been a reduction in the supply of cheap accommodation in the area. But despite the evidence before them, the Commissioners continued to concern themselves with the problem of why the Cross and Torrens Acts had not been widely adopted, rather than asking why, where used, there was no extensive building of working class homes.

The Commission also enquired into the Shaftesbury Lodging Houses Acts and the 1866 Sanitary Act (which allowed for the inspection of multiple occupancy dwellings). The Shaftesbury Act for the building of model lodgings was a dead letter: Shaftesbury declared in his evidence that he was the only person in the country who knew of its existence. As for the other acts, local authorities were reluctant to use their powers of inspection. Chelsea and Hackney were the only two London districts which had been known to take advantage of them, including the provisions for night inspection. Bristol had a list of registered houses but only six houses appeared on it, as registration and inspection were used merely as threats.<sup>57</sup>

What had prevented this legislation from being more widely applied? The Commissioners were troubled by what seemed to them an administrative failure. There seemed to be widespread ignorance of the law, not only among city and town councillors, but also among local health officials. Witnesses from Bristol, including a clergyman and a Poor Law Guardian, had been told by the local Medical Officer



of Health that action could not be taken under the Cross and Torrens Acts unless the unhealthiness of the property, or even the actual presence of typhoid, could be proved. The Medical Officer confirmed this was his belief. A witness from Newcastle admitted bye-laws drawn up under the 1866 Sanitary Act had been forgotten; interest in them was only beginning to revive.<sup>58</sup> Expense was another great deterrent to action. There was a widespread horror of putting a burden on the rates. The expense of compulsory purchase was often given as the reason why improvement schemes had not been carried out, although the act passed in 1882 on the recommendation of the Select Committee had done much to prevent exorbitant compensation payments. In London the fear of expense (and trouble) led to interminable conflicts between the vestries and District Boards and the Metropolitan Board of Works as to whether a particular scheme came under the Cross or Torrens Acts. These conflicts usually resulted in a stalemate, with both authorities disclaiming responsibility. The witness representing the Local Government Board presented forceful evidence on this point.<sup>59</sup> The procedures for taking action in the provinces, especially under the Cross Act, were extremely cumbersome. In addition to these practical difficulties, compulsory purchase and demolition were still regarded with some trepidation as attacks on property and a dangerous extension of government power. A witness from Bristol





described the attitude of the Health Officer there: "I think he would say it is an unfit building and I would shut it up, but he very much shrinks from actually saying, you must pull down that man's property and destroy it."<sup>60</sup>

It was particularly difficult to make this decision when "that man" was a member of the town council or vestry. The presence of landlords and middlemen in local government, especially on the sanitary boards, in many instances prevented the effective operation of legislation. There was little interest in local elections or in the activities of local government, working-class people were in most instances prevented from standing as candidates by the property qualification and the very poor had no vote. A few middlemen and landlords, elected by acclamation, could tie up a whole area, blocking legislation and intimidating the Medical Officer and sanitary inspectors. A particularly bad example was the Clerkenwell vestry, which administered the area of London examined in detail by the Commission. It contained thirteen or fourteen property owners, a few rent collectors and one or two publicans. These men were the most regular attenders at vestry meetings.<sup>61</sup>

Witnesses from Clerkenwell were recalled for further examination when the rest of the evidence had been heard, for the Commission was concerned to investigate, in Dilke's words, "The undue representation in the case of this parish of this special kind of interest known as



house farming." Housing conditions in Clerkenwell were very bad; Dilke considered that it contained some of the worst areas in London. The Commission heard of men like Mr. Ross, "the dictator of Clerkenwell," and the notorious Mr. Flight who made a good living from unfit property while sitting on the vestry. One housefarmer was the vice-chairman of the Assessment and Appeals Committee, and another was chairman of the Works Committee; both these posts were concerned with slum clearance and inspection.<sup>62</sup> In many of the places where such interests were represented in the local authority, the position of conscientious and disinterested health officials was made intolerable. The Newcastle Medical Officer, asked if he was aware what the fever dens had cost the city in lives in the past ten years, replied: "I have, but to make common use of such arguments is to gain for oneself the character of an enthusiast, which will not improve one's position as an officer of health."<sup>63</sup> In Alnwick, where six members of the local sanitary board were landlords, the Medical Officer had retired defeated by the obstructions he encountered. He was pessimistic about the prospect before his successor: "There is no scope for a young man at Alnwick."<sup>64</sup>

There were a few suggestions for redeeming this situation. The importance of an alert and concerned public was emphasized by a sanitary engineer from New York who was visiting London and had been brought to the



attention of the Commission by Chadwick. He described the reforms in building legislation and the increased effectiveness of the Board of Public Health which interest and concern among New Yorkers had helped bring about.<sup>65</sup> The reform of London government under a more effective central authority was inevitably mentioned. Octavia Hill suggested the election of better men to office in local government; by "better" she meant high-minded philanthropists, such as members of the Charity Organization Society, who had already permeated several Poor Law Boards. A few thought that the participation of more working-class men in local government might be an advantage. On the whole, however, while most witnesses who were questioned about local government deplored the impotence of legislation and the lethargy, if not corruption, of local authorities, they agreed that the only real solution would be a general change of heart and the presence of some "motive power" among the public.<sup>66</sup>

The Commissioners took a great interest in the philanthropic housing societies, for these organizations were specifically attempting to increase the supply of working-class dwellings and to improve the physical and moral environment of the poor. Every type of housing society was examined, from the Peabody Trust to the Hastings Cottage Improvement Society. The Peabody Trust was considered in the greatest detail because it was thought of as a quasi-public body.<sup>67</sup> It was the largest and the best known



and it had been sold land by the Metropolitan Board at preferential rates. The Commissioners and many of the witnesses adopted a surprisingly critical attitude to the Peabody organization. The main objection was that it did not cater for the very poor. The rent was high, families were obliged to take at least two rooms and no subletting was allowed. It was pointed out that there were no stables for costermongers' donkeys (this fact troubled the Commissioners considerably), tenants were not allowed to take in washing, and the long and detailed list of rules was an effective deterrent to those who did not fit the trustees' image of the desirable working man. The policemen, "railway servants" and artisans who occupied the Peabody Buildings were rarely, if ever, the ones who had been turned out when the site had been cleared. There were other complaints that the buildings were too elaborate and that they were badly ventilated. Firm believers in laissez-faire economics maintained that the Trust, which sought only a 3% return and had received assistance from the Metropolitan Board, was undercutting the private builder and was financially unsound.<sup>68</sup> But most of the criticism of the Trust came from people who supported its charitable basis yet attacked it for not acting, in effect, as a government welfare agency. As Shaw-Lefevre told the Commission: "The Peabody Trustees seem to me to adopt the idea of charity without carrying it to the point where they reach the lowest class."<sup>69</sup>





The other philanthropic societies were not judged as severely as the Peabody Trust, though many of the same criticisms were voiced. There were too many rules, the rents were too high, the very poor deliberately excluded. The Industrial Dwellings Company of Newcastle was an interesting exception, for according to the manager their tenants were mostly labourers, some earning as little as 10s. a week, and the Company allowed arrears during periods of high unemployment. Most of the other societies regarded debt as the cardinal sin. The Newcastle Company's system of financing was also unusual: they had borrowed from the Public Loans Commission (housing societies usually began with money from private investors or charitable grants) and for the first few years profits were going to pay back this loan. The East End Dwellings Company built for the inhabitants of the Whitechapel slums the kind of solid, cheap, personally supervised barracks of which Octavia Hill approved. The Hastings Cottage Improvement Society was a model philanthropic housing society by late nineteenth century standards: it renovated old property, sought to improve the morals of its tenants and moreover made a healthy profit of  $5\frac{1}{2}\%$ .<sup>70</sup> All this was very encouraging, but there was evidence that there were limits to what could be accomplished by philanthropy. Evidence was heard from the solicitor of the Bristol Industrial Dwellings Company on the society's lack of success (its profit of 2% was con-



sidered a failure). Lyulph Stanley asked the witness: "Do you think that any scheme that has to rely upon charitable effort...can ever deal with the question of housing the poor?" He replied: "No, I do not think for a moment it can....We have raised £22,000, and we accomodate 141 families."<sup>71</sup>

Octavia Hill was closely examined on her system of housing the very poor. Her method was to take over and renovate old houses and attempt to raise the inhabitants, morally and economically, through the personal supervision of lady rent collectors. Octavia Hill's approach to housing embodied the dominant social philosophy of the mid-nineteenth century. She saw poverty not as a social phenomenon but as evidence of personal failure or misfortune, and she believed that the solution to the slum problem lay in the guidance and education of the poor towards middle class standards and values. She was suspicious of any form of charity or subsidy because she believed this was harmful to character and sound economics. Subsidizing housing, she told the Commission, would signal the re-introduction of the old Poor Law system of rate in aid of wages, though state loans granted to housing societies were admissable "if such a loan is made quietly and they [the poor] know nothing about it." Her own houses were self-supporting and returned a profit to investors. The strength of her own personality, as well as her social philosophy, led Octavia



Hill to see problems and solutions in terms of personal, individual action. In her evidence she rejected the state, the city and the parish as house builders and alleged that even companies like the Peabody Trust were inferior to the individually supervised scheme where the manager could dictate terms. "The management depends very much on judgement of character....You must say to this man 'Go', and you must say to that one 'Stay'." Through an extension of this system and its adoption by private landlords she thought the problem of housing the poor could be solved. "I am sure I could do it myself."<sup>72</sup>

Like most of their contemporaries, the Commissioners were very impressed with Octavia Hill's work. Her methods seemed to them admirable; she had achieved remarkable success in apparently hopeless cases and she had demonstrated that slum dwellers could be rehoused commercially, on a very small scale. But they could not follow her all the way. They were not misled (as she herself was) into thinking that her scheme could be a solution to the massive problem of working class housing. While Octavia Hill clung to an earlier view, seeing poverty and bad housing in individual, moralistic terms, the majority of the Commissioners were groping towards wider explanations in terms of society and economics. Lord Salisbury, for instance, who had begun by believing that Octavia Hill's approach was "the philosophy of the whole matter" was now worrying



about the breakdown of the law of supply and demand, and the disproportion between rents and wages which seemed unlikely to change "until small houses are more common or until wealth is more common."<sup>73</sup> From this viewpoint the lady rent collector was an irrelevance.

The Commission turned from the consideration of philanthropy to the various public schemes, government loans and state incentives to house building then in operation. No-one foresaw the coming of housing as a social service, or envisaged vast council estates as an answer to the slums. But several witnesses thought the state should play a more active part in encouraging building, especially by granting loans on easier terms. The Assistant Financial Secretary to the Treasury was rigorously examined on the question of building loans to individuals, companies or local authorities from the Public Works Loans Board. It was felt, particularly by Lord Salisbury, that the loans authorized under the Labouring Classes Dwellings Act of 1866 were being granted on unnecessarily severe terms: 4% interest with a maximum repayment period of 40 years. The Commissioners were unconvinced by the Treasury arguments that only on these terms could the loans be made solvent. There was particular concern that borrowing had fallen off since 1879 when the terms had been made more stringent.<sup>74</sup> Surveying the poor record of borrowing from the Board, the Commissioners concluded that the terms were now prohibitive for all but





the largest and wealthiest authorities. There was some interest in the one local authority which had experience of public housing on a small scale: Liverpool had built several tenement blocks over the past 20 years under a local law.<sup>75</sup> London, of course, was given special attention in the matter of incentives to building working-class housing. Reform of London government and the spreading of costs over the whole area were recognized as essential pre-requisites to building in London on government loans.

Witnesses were also called to give evidence on the building societies, which had begun earlier in the century as small-scale co-operative ventures and were now in some areas helping large numbers of working men to build or buy their own houses. The building societies were, for several reasons, more successful in the North. The Secretary of the Leeds Permanent Building Company asserted that his organization had housed 100,000 out of a population of 320,000 in Leeds. One working class area of Leeds was said to be built largely out of building society funds. This was agreed to be a very hopeful development which should be encouraged. It was an incentive to self-help and independence and a sign that in some cases working class people could solve their own housing problem. But it was evident that the building societies could do little or nothing in an overcrowded city like London, nor could they meet the needs of people who could scarcely afford to feed and clothe themselves, let alone borrow from a building society at 4%.



Thomas Fatkin of the Leeds Permanent Building Company admitted that their members were usually earning between 30s. and £2 a week (the wage of a skilled worker in a thriving trade) and that they had few "common labourers."<sup>76</sup>

Some witnesses offered intriguing suggestions for improving working-class housing. Several people placed great hope in the wider use of concrete, which would bring down housing costs. One builder told of his experiments to demonstrate the satisfactory nature of concrete and iron structures: he had built a concrete shed and lit a bonfire inside and the building had remained intact. Edwin Chadwick digressed from his sanitary concerns to enthuse about the concrete lodge he had built. Building bye-laws were mentioned as a method of improving housing conditions which had done much in the past and might do more.<sup>77</sup> The idea of removing prisons from the centre of London to leave the sites free for housing attracted a great deal of interest, especially from Cardinal Manning.<sup>78</sup> Then there was the question of house-building by employers. The Commission was eager to hear of cases where this had been tried. One third of the houses in Crewe were said to be the property of the railway company which was the main employer in the town. There were glowing reports of the wonderful housing built in Dublin for employees of the Guinness Company.<sup>79</sup> But these were isolated examples and there seemed no likelihood of the company town becoming a common feature of British



life. No mention was made of the few model towns, such as Saltaire in Yorkshire or the more recent Bournville, which pioneered the idea of new, planned communities (though they were essentially company towns).<sup>80</sup> Emigration, which had captured the imagination of philanthropists earlier in the century as an answer to the problems of crowded cities, was mentioned only briefly and with little interest. Emigration could serve as an escape route for a few but was clearly unrealistic as a remedy for a national housing problem.

The evidence on urban housing in England and Wales makes fascinating reading; it provides an insight into the living conditions and the social ideas in late Victorian Britain. But the Commissioners who had elicited this mass of information and expert opinion were less successful at drawing it together, analysing it and formulating conclusions and recommendations. The volume of evidence shows that by the 1880's some progress had been made towards stating the problem. However, it is clear from the Report and Recommendations that the Commission lacked the intellectual and political concepts necessary to proceed from the problem to the solution.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE REPORT AND THE AFTERMATH

For the historian, the evidence brought together by the Commission is most interesting: the factual detail, the wide cross section of opinion, the assumptions inherent in the questions put to witnesses and the reaction to their replies. But for contemporaries who were concerned about the slum problem, the volume containing the Report and the Recommendations was of first importance. Sharing many of the anxieties and assumptions of the Commissioners, they were eager to know what hypotheses had been extracted from the evidence; what solutions could be offered by respected and presumably intelligent men who had spent months examining the problem.

As with most government enquiries, the membership had been chosen from a broad but acceptable range of opinion. What extremes there were from the advocates of public ownership of urban land at one end to the defenders of laissez-faire at the other, cancelled one another out. The result was an intelligent but conservative summary of the evidence and a list of Recommendations which were sensible but unoriginal and made no attempt to tackle the basic problems. The Commission as a whole was prevented by its function and composition from saying anything new;





inevitably its statements articulated what ordinary, moderate middle-class people of the time were thinking. Dilke, who had devoted himself with energy and enthusiasm to the Commission's work, was privately disappointed. The Commission, he commented, had been "dull, although it produced a certain amount of valuable evidence." On the Recommendations he wrote: "I personally would go much further."<sup>1</sup>

According to Manning's biographer, "the final report was largely the work of Manning and Dilke, labouring together at the former's residence."<sup>2</sup> It was well written and well organized. The main emphasis was on overcrowding and the evidence was summarized under the following headings: the facts about overcrowding, the effects of these conditions and the causes. There was also a brief summary of other aspects of working class housing not related to overcrowding. These included structural defects and the evils of jerry building, the inadequacy of the water supply in many areas, the need for better refuse collection and above all improved sanitary facilities.

The survey of the factual evidence of overcrowding was written to shock. The worst examples were detailed and the evils connected with the overcrowding of people in single buildings and of many buildings in one area were graphically described. On the question of the effects produced by these conditions, the Report was similarly outspoken. Sexual immorality was of course mentioned, though



"Your Majesty's Commissioners felt bound to put it on record that...they find that the standard of morality among the inhabitants of these crowded quarters is higher than might have been expected." Ill health produced by crowding was stressed and much was made of the deceptiveness of official statistics. It was observed that only deaths taking place in private homes appeared in the local mortality lists, and much ill health such as "exhaustion" and the childhood disease of ophthalmia went unrecorded. Intemperance and dirt were also cited as evils associated with overcrowding ("the warmest apologist for the working classes would not assert the general prevalence of cleanly habits among them").<sup>3</sup>

These considerations led the Commissioners on to the vexed question of cause and effect. They quoted with apparent approval the title of a pamphlet of the time: Is it the Pig that makes the Sty or the Sty that makes the Pig? The conclusion drawn from the evidence was expressed in more moderate language: "The strictest caution is necessary not to let regret and disapproval of the ravages of intemperance divert attention from other evils which make the homes of the working classes wretched, evils over which they have never had any control....The answer is probably the unsatisfactory one that drink and poverty act and react upon one another."<sup>4</sup> For the time, this was an enlightened statement. It is interesting, however, that a



Royal Commission on Housing felt it incumbent upon itself to consider the question of the morals of the poor and pronounce upon them at some length in the official Report.

In the section on overcrowding, the Report listed virtually every cause that had been suggested by witnesses. The basic problem as the Commission saw it was that wages and rents were completely disproportionate. High rents, rather than low wages, were their concern, and the high rents resulted from the fact that, for numerous reasons, demand for housing far out-stripped supply in city centres. This was an important insight, although most of the Commissioners failed to draw the obvious conclusions. It was repeatedly stressed that the demand, and therefore the overcrowding, were most serious in London. Conditions elsewhere were bad but not quite so intolerable, and in provincial centres crowding resulted, so the Report alleged, from factors which were different in nearly every case.<sup>5</sup>

The emphasis on London, though understandable, tended to mislead the Commissioners. The section of the hearings devoted to London was so large that the provincial sample was inadequate and provided little basis for generalization. For example, it was impossible to draw any meaningful conclusion about housing in small towns from the two completely different cases of Alnwick and Camborne, and the evidence from the large cities was too restricted to



provide a total picture. In the absence of adequate statistics, evidence from a few clergymen and the Medical Officer of Health often produced horror stories about the worst cases in the town rather than a general picture of the housing conditions of the whole working-class population, the local rent structure and prospects for the future. Clerkenwell had been investigated in a comprehensive way and the result were invaluable. Though such close examination of the whole country was impossible in the time available to the Commission, the supplementation of oral evidence with more local surveys and reports might have enabled the Commissioners to see the housing problem in a more comprehensive light. Every industrial town had its slum; the problem of supply and demand (as the Victorians phrased it) was a national one. Yet the Commissioners almost dismissed provincial overcrowding and devoted over half their Recommendations to the Metropolis, failing to see that inadequate housing was a problem of a whole society.

The thirty Recommendations covered a vast field, from reform of the tax structure to building public mortuaries. In London, changes were needed in the sanitary, building and public health laws, although in a discussion of proposed changes in the Metropolitan sanitary laws the Commission observed that one could not ensure enforcement of the laws "until the people show a more active in-





terest in the management of their local affairs." The system of inspection and the selection of inspectors should be improved, and these officials should be employed full-time. The purchase of neglected houses placed under a local authority order should not be mandatory, as the existing regulations stated. The Commission recommended a system of arbitration between the Metropolitan Board of Works and the vestries when dispute arose over improvement schemes, but in any case the reform of London government was strongly recommended. The Cross and Torrens Acts should be made enforceable under an order from the Secretary of State, and it should be made easier for a local sanitary authority to adopt Section 90 of the 1875 public health act (the clause allowing for the proper inspection of tenements). Widespread ignorance of the law among people in local government might be countered by simplification and consolidation of the law. The suggestion that had been raised about removing prison sites from the centre to free the land for housing was also mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the Commissioners declared, in their opinion there had been a failure of administration rather than legislation. What was needed was some "motive power." "And probably there can be no stronger motive power than public opinion."<sup>7</sup> Though this comment referred to London, the same idea ran through the whole Report.

Moving on to the general urban Recommendations, the



Commission urged that it should be made easier for local authorities, individuals and charitable organizations to borrow money for building and improving working-class dwellings. Loans should be made available at the lowest rates possible without involving the Treasury in loss. Despite strong opposition from Collings and Broadhurst, the Commissioners suggested that money for housing could come from the profits of the Post Office Savings Bank. Extensions were demanded to the Shaftesbury Lodgings Houses Act to encourage schemes under them.<sup>8</sup> The Commission shied away from recommending local authority building on a scale large enough to produce any substantial improvement; perhaps this idea never occurred to them. Still, they endorsed the principle of borrowing from public funds by local authorities to build working class housing, and in the clause referring to London prison sites the Commissioners recommended the disposal of public land at preferential rates for housing. Such concessions to the principle of public housing were to prove the thin edge of the wedge by which large scale council housing entered the British social scene in the twentieth century.

Reform of the tax structure was recommended, both for the purposes of obtaining revenue and to encourage building on vacant land. The power of the local authorities should be strengthened in other ways: stricter penalties and simpler procedures would help local authorities



to operate sanitary regulations more effectively and in principle the water supply should be publicly owned. The Commission proposed changes in the Cross Acts, remarking that though these Acts were potentially very useful, performance under them had been disappointing. Working-class people should be helped in every way to own their own homes; one specific suggestion was that the legal costs of the land should be reduced. Camps of hop pickers and the "van towns" of itinerants should be brought under local sanitary regulations.<sup>9</sup>

Other Recommendations sought to encourage a sense of responsibility for housing among individuals and organizations. Though the Commissioners recognized the criticisms that had been made of the philanthropic housing societies, they wished to encourage further philanthropic undertakings which would increase the supply of accommodation and thus, it was hoped, bring down the rents of existing dwellings. The laws governing the management of Trust Funds might be altered in this direction. Predictably, the Commission recommended that the Railway Companies should be forced to do their duty with regard to both workmen's trains and rehousing. The Commissioners urged that the owners of houses should be held responsible for damage suffered by tenants as a result of inadequate sanitation and landlords should provide their houses with water closets, even in cases where the house had been built at a



time when water closets were a rare luxury. The force of this proposal was unfortunately weakened in the next sentence: "It might however be necessary to provide for the relaxation of the law in certain cases."<sup>10</sup> As a general recommendation, "Your Majesty's Commissioners also recommend that it shall be declared by statute to be the duty of the local authority to put into force such powers as they are by law entrusted with, so as to ensure that no premises shall be allowed to exist in an unsatisfactory state."<sup>11</sup> The strengthening of executive control was certainly necessary, but here as elsewhere, the Commissioners fell back on the assumption that the laws, which were based on a public health interpretation of the housing problem, were on the whole adequate. So much of the evidence before the Commissioners, and their own conclusions on such issues as public loans, had proved the contrary.

It must not be forgotten that the main Report and the Recommendations were compromise documents. That they did contain several constructive proposals was a tribute to Dilke's skill in holding conflicting points of view together. The degree of conflict must not be exaggerated; all the Commissioners believed to a greater or lesser extent in the sanctity of private property and self-help, though they also recognized the need for a certain amount of public control to restrain self-interest and to protect the community at large, as well as the poor and defenceless.





But there were important differences in emphasis, if not in principle, within the Commission. These emerged in the numerous memoranda signed by members in various groupings, which appeared at the end of the volume.

Half the Commissioners, representing a broad range of opinion, signed a "supplementary recommendation" which sought to limit the leasehold system and encourage leaseholders to buy up the freehold of their land.<sup>12</sup> These men were obviously impressed by Lord William Compton's attack on the leasehold system and the theory (still prevalent today) that a property owner is a more responsible person than a tenant. Godwin, with his special interest in the building trade, advocated the wider use of cheap materials such as concrete and urged consideration of foreign experiments in company housing for employees.<sup>13</sup> Broadhurst, supported by a few others including Manning, Collings and Morley, expressed the hope that legal impediments to home ownership by working-class people would be removed.<sup>14</sup> This recommendation had been included in the first draft of the Report, but had finally been omitted as outside the scope of the inquiry.

Apart from these memoranda, which recorded the special concerns of particular Commissioners, the memoranda divided into two groups, the strongly reformist and the reactionary, which expressed the extreme points of view a compromise Report had been unable to contain. Goschen,



Stanley and Morley feared the introduction of "measures which...are calculated to weaken the motives which prompt the steady development of private enterprises." In their view, local authority building would undermine private initiative, and it was impossible to combine municipal and private schemes. It was foolish, even dangerous, to encourage hopes among the working class in London that large-scale building would be undertaken, since this was clearly impossible. Moreover, discussion of such schemes might arouse builders' apprehensions. The other members of the Commission had not, they felt, paid enough attention to the constructive aspects of philanthropic housing; these companies certainly made profits, but it was precisely the combination of success in housing the poor and "commercial principles" which these men applauded. The memorandum also expressed a fear of the consequences of greater owner liability. The recommendation on London government was singled out for emphasis. It was useless to hope for improvement while the present system of local government in London persisted.<sup>15</sup> Sir Richard Cross also expressed his opposition to housing schemes undertaken by local authorities, since he too was convinced that this would undermine independence and private enterprise. However, he was willing to see lodging houses erected under Lord Shaftesbury's Act, presumably on the grounds that these would cater for the "lowest class," the incorrigible vagrants whose charac-



ters could not be further debased by such charity. Goschen joined Cross in recording his dissent from the recommendation that vacant land should be taxed. They regarded this as an "entirely new principle" of taxation and dangerous in its implications.<sup>16</sup>

These memoranda were essentially negative, indicating the poverty of laissez-faire social and economic theories in the face of late nineteenth century conditions. It was clear that private enterprise had failed to house the population adequately. This was why the Commission had been set up, and the evidence before the Commission had proved conclusively that a new approach was necessary. Yet men like Goschen, Morley and Stanley refused to admit this and resorted to pious repetitions of the old moralistic cliches. For them the cures, which represented a threat to property, were infinitely worse than the disease.

The radical, reformist memoranda consisted of one signed by Dwyer Gray and a second, signed by Jesse Collings with substantial support from Manning, Carrington, Bedford, Broadhurst and, curiously enough, Morley. There was also a memorandum contributed by Lord Salisbury which reflects the ambiguity of his thinking at this time. Salisbury began with the statement that he regretted the Report did not contain "fuller and more definite recommendations in regard to one point of capital importance--the overcrowding in the centre of London" (he still believed supply



and demand would eventually solve overcrowding elsewhere). But on this issue, Salisbury's practical suggestions consistently fell short of his rhetoric. After this stirring introduction, the only additional proposal he felt able to support was the one concerning prison sites (a proposal admittedly considered wild and extremist by many). Salisbury objected to the idea of allowing local authorities to build with funds taken from the rates. He was against forcing freeholders to sell and disapproved of taxing vacant land at its capital value, rather than the actual income.<sup>17</sup> Salisbury's memorandum expresses the dilemma of many of his intelligent contemporaries: recognizing at least some of the problems he was unable to consider real solutions.

Dwyer Gray was one who attempted to fight through the entanglements of late Victorian anxieties and assumptions to discover solutions commensurate with the problems. "I am convinced," he wrote, "that mere modifications to legislation, though useful in their way, will be found quite ineffective to cope with the terrible condition of affairs disclosed." Legislation should indeed be reformed and some of Dwyer Gray's ideas on this subject were quite far-reaching, such as the prosecution of neglectful landlords under criminal charges and the heavy taxation of vacant houses. But all taxation and legislative reforms were palliatives. The only real solution was "to enable





the local authority...to acquire the fee-simple in the entire of its district" in order to keep down rents. Gray was apparently no socialist, but this can only be read as a call for the public ownership of urban land, defended with the familiar Radical argument that unearned profits (resulting from rises in land values) should return to the community. Gray explained this "logically unassailable" proposal in some detail, adding, perhaps ingenuously, that he believed the principle was already foreshadowed in the Cross Acts.<sup>18</sup>

Collings' recommendations also called for drastic action. He urged the reform of London government and the rating of ground rents, and expressed his strong disapproval of the practice of cutting off the water supply. The language of the recommendation concerned with this was not, he believed, strong enough. But more significantly, turning to the question of overcrowding, Collings dismissed the principle of supply and demand as a solution to city crowding. There "the rent of the dwellings...is not governed by the principle of 'supply and demand' as the term is usually understood." The working classes "on whom the wealth and prosperity of the country and the safety of its institutions mainly depend" must be protected; Collings suggested compulsory purchase of land and houses by local authorities in central urban areas. A public body, if given the power, would be more efficient and, because free of considerations of profit, more concerned



with the well-being of the poor than private enterprise could ever be. Anticipating the charge that these measures would interfere with property rights, he denied that they would touch the "just rights" of property, but he declared that in any case the natural rights of human beings should override all other considerations.<sup>19</sup>

It is unclear how far Collings (like Gray) wished to carry his proposals for public ownership in city centres. The wide range of support he received from other Commissioners (such as Bedford and Broadhurst) as well as Collings' own political philosophy suggest that these ideas should not be interpreted too radically. Certainly, however, the proposal is in sharp contrast to conservative economic ideas about free enterprise and property values. In adding his signature to Collings' memorandum, Samuel Morley thus gave his support to two contradictory memoranda, one advocating wide local authority initiative and even compulsory purchase in central areas to reduce housing costs, the other deploring unnecessary municipal action and government subsidies. This is either a reflection of Morley's own confusion or the general perplexity about housing problems, perhaps both.

Dilke, as chairman of the Housing Commission, was unable to express a dissenting viewpoint, but his views should be recorded here. As a Radical Liberal and President of the Local Government Board during the period when the



Commission was considering the evidence on England and Wales, Dilke had come to believe that more fundamental changes than those included in the Recommendations were necessary. Five years later he stated: "I...would allow towns to build or hire or buy, and would encourage them to solve their problems for themselves" (local authority initiative was an anathema to orthodox economists). He argued that local authorities should only have to approach the central government for the right to purchase land cheaply and tax freely. Dilke also approved of compulsory purchase without compensation in certain cases, and he thought landlords should be held more fully responsible for neglect.<sup>20</sup> In 1885 Dilke had to keep these opinions to himself, but it is now clear on which side his sympathies lay.

Thus there were men on the Housing Commission who felt that the Report did not go far enough in creating a national policy towards housing, especially in regard to taxation reform and the regulation of property rights. They saw the existing situation in a clearer light than their colleagues, and were groping towards radical solutions. But ultimately their proposals are disappointing. The compulsory purchase of the freehold of certain areas, for example, could by itself do nothing to improve housing conditions though it might prevent further deterioration. Taxation reforms might open up a few more buildings to working-class habitation, but it would do little to meet



the need for thousands of additional low-rental houses and flats. There was a lack of constructive imagination. Though it would be unfair to expect these people to step outside their environment and anticipate the solutions which occurred to later generations, it is interesting that no-one recommended large-scale local authority housing financed both from the rates and a central fund, or rent control, or a government assisted mortgage plan, or even government aid for domestic sanitary improvements, all of which were to be undertaken, with varying degrees of success, in the twentieth century.

Press reaction to the findings of the Housing Commission was predictable. The Pall Mall Gazette, expressing the proprietary interest it had shown towards the Commission from the start, ran the characteristically exaggerated headline: "An Epoch Making Report."<sup>21</sup> The Times ran a full-page summary of the Report, quoting with apparent approval the passage describing administrative rather than legislative failures and recommending the "motive power" of public opinion.<sup>22</sup> Reynolds Newspaper offered a dissenting view, expressing curious amazement that a prince and a cardinal should be among the members of a Commission which produced "as disappointing an official deliverance as we ever remember to have read. The Commissioners... fear to make a drastic recommendation which would shock landlordism to the centre." Reynolds Newspaper wanted to





see municipalities buying land and building and letting houses at cost price.<sup>23</sup> At the other extreme, a statement made at a meeting of the Association of Public Sanitary Inspectors asserted that the Commission held sanitary inspectors and landlords responsible for all bad housing. On the contrary, London was very sanitary and the vestries had done good work; the only answer was more suburbs and more workmen's trains.<sup>24</sup>

The Commission's findings on housing in England and Wales were published early in May 1885 and in July Lord Salisbury presented to Parliament a Bill based on his interpretation of the evidence and recommendations.<sup>25</sup> Salisbury was now Prime Minister, following the collapse of Gladstone's second administration a few weeks before. Though he headed a minority Government, Salisbury's sponsorship gave the Housing of the Working Classes (England) Bill a certain prestige. More important, it may have helped the Bill to pass the Lords. On the other hand, this type of social legislation was regarded as an issue outside party politics at the time and Lord Salisbury, as he had mentioned in his National Review article, hoped that this state of affairs would continue. He pointed out that the Housing Bill was not a Government Bill. It was not even a Conservative Bill since Sir Charles Dilke, "who certainly was not likely to advance the interests of the Conservative Party," would speak in its support in the Commons.<sup>26</sup>



As several Members of Parliament pointed out, Salisbury's Bill was a somewhat chaotic document. This was inevitable, for Salisbury had selected from the Recommendations the points he thought were most important and the ones that could be formulated into an acceptable body of legislation. His priorities were by no means representative of the whole Commission, as many of his colleagues were quick to point out. Salisbury put forward various amendments to the Lodging Houses Acts (Shaftesbury's Acts), for like many of the Commissioners he thought that these Acts, which had been disregarded from the day they became law, contained important principles and hopeful features. In a proposal which would no doubt have horrified Shaftesbury (who was near death at the time), Salisbury suggested legally extending the term "lodging house" to cover separate houses and dwellings for the working classes. These and other modifications would enable local authorities to build permanent dwellings for working class families as well as vagrants. But in Salisbury's usual manner, this important proposal was hedged around with so many safeguards and conditions that the application of the Acts was virtually precluded. Once a local sanitary authority had applied for a certificate to build, the Local Government Board had to send out an inspector to ensure that accommodation for working people was essential in that area, that there was no reasonable probability



that the accommodation would be provided without the Shaftesbury Acts, and that the burden on the rates would not be excessive--in short that it was "in all the circumstances prudent" for the local authority to take this action. If the inspector reported that all these conditions existed, action had to wait until after the next local government election so that the ratepayers would have a chance to accept or reject the scheme.

The difference between this plan and Dilke's ideas on local authority initiative is striking. Whatever Salisbury's intentions, these conditions, and particularly the one stipulating that an election must be held before any action could be taken, presented an effective barrier to building under the Shaftesbury Acts. It is clear that his contemporaries recognized this, for debates on the Bill paid scarcely any attention to the proposed changes in the Lodging Houses Acts and concentrated on the prison sites clause which, if passed, might be put into action.

Clause three, which proposed selling central London prison sites for building, proved to be very controversial. Salisbury suggested that the sites be sold to the Metropolitan Board of Works at such a price that they could be used for building under the Lodging Houses Acts, without incurring a loss. If the sites were sold with this purpose in mind, the price that could be obtained would inevitably be below market value. Thus the scheme involved, in an



indirect way, the subsidization of housing for some working class people.

Other clauses proposed slight changes in existing laws to make them more effective. The Commission's recommendation that local authorities should be freed from the obligation to buy houses which were under a demolition or improvement order was included. One section dealt with the failure of local authorities to take advantage of their existing powers. Salisbury advocated the setting up of machinery to handle complaints against local authorities and to force such authorities to carry out their obligations under sanitary, public health and dwellings improvements acts. Appeals against compensation decisions would be made even more difficult, and every local authority would have the power to put into practice the famous Section 90 of the Public Health Act (1875), if the Bill was accepted. Laws obliging furnished premises to be let in a reasonable condition would be extended to unfurnished accommodation. There were two further items from which concerned and optimistic conservatives like Salisbury hoped much. One referred to the Settled Land Act and allowed trustees to take into account the purpose for which land was being sold or let, rather than having to accept the most profitable offer. An Amendment to this Act allowing for the improvement of working class dwellings on urban estates was also included. The Commission's concern with loans from





the Treasury found expression in a clause requiring the Public Works Loans Commission to make loans to any agency undertaking a scheme for working class dwellings on the most generous rates possible without incurring a loss to the Treasury.

The Bill thus excluded any measure of tax reform, or any reference to the legal obligations of railway companies in the matter of workmen's trains or demolitions. Other omissions, notably the reform of London government, were more understandable since there were limits to what one piece of legislation could include. Introducing the Bill to the Lords with great skill, Salisbury warned that no "magic formula" for improving urban housing was possible. The Bill was not "sensational or extreme"; it had the merit of being precise and specific. As a general defence, Salisbury implied that patriotism demanded such legislation. It was the English people who carried on the traditions and institutions of the country. To defend the nation one must improve the physical conditions in which the people lived. Housing conditions deserved the "earnest, careful, unflagging and yet circumspect attention both of the philanthropist and the statesman."<sup>27</sup>

Lord Wemyss was the foremost opponent of the Bill in the Lords. The clauses aimed to strengthen the sanitary laws he found acceptable, but he believed the rest of the Bill was very dangerous in its implications.<sup>28</sup>In a



debate some days later Wemyss again referred to Salisbury's Bill in a lengthy denunciation of "the socialistic tendencies of recent legislation." He alleged that the Housing Bill was one indubitable instance of this creeping socialism. Lord Salisbury replied: "The main commandment of my noble friend is: Thou shalt not use the public resources to benefit the poor."<sup>29</sup>

The clause allowing for the purchase of prison sites produced heated debate. Economic, moral and legal arguments were put forward (unfortunately the opponents of this kind of legislation could not resort to the constitutional arguments which were so useful to their American counterparts). To those who attacked the proposal Salisbury, who was not at a loss in an argument about political morality, retorted that he wished those who urged laissez-faire and equal treatment when it came to giving applied the same criterion to taking, the taking of working class houses to build railways and improvements. After further debate, however, Salisbury accepted the amendment that "the price be not less than the price when it was purchased" be added to the prison sites clause, and Wemyss refrained from opposing the third reading as he had earlier threatened to do. On July 21, the Bill passed the Lords.<sup>30</sup>

The passage of the Bill through the Commons was far more prolonged and stormy. A number of the most active members of the Commission sat in the House of Commons, and



all felt compelled to participate in the debate. As one M.P. remarked, more Commissioners seemed to speak against the Bill than for it. Salisbury's Bill was in one way or another unsatisfactory to nearly all his colleagues on the Commission who sat in the Commons. In addition, the Commons contained many other men who were concerned about it. The Bill was introduced by Cross, who was now Secretary for the Home Department. He repeated many of Salisbury's arguments, including the notion that motives of nationalism demanded housing reform. Speaking with far less skill than Salisbury, he defended Clause 13 (which made landlords liable for harm suffered by tenants) against the opposition which had grown outside Parliament, particularly from the building societies, and he rambled for some time about his own Act, mostly its merits but also its deficiencies. In conclusion he declared that "the measure was not a large one, and would not remedy every grievance, for men must, after all, help themselves," but it would do something to ameliorate the situation.<sup>31</sup>

Lyulph Stanley then rose in an extraordinary attempt to sabotage the Bill. He denied that it presented the unanimous opinions of the Royal Commission (strictly speaking the Bill was not formally associated with the Commission, but some connexion was assumed). Echoing Wemyss, he declared that some of the Bill's implications were alarming. Consideration of the whole measure should be left to the next session when, he alleged, they would



have more time to go into those points. In any case, nothing could be done before London government had been reformed. As for central prison sites, he thought they might be used for better purposes than housing. What about an extension to the National Gallery? Moreover, if these sites were granted for housing in London, people elsewhere would understandably begin to demand similar concessions. It is difficult to comprehend this outburst on Stanley's part, or to discover his main argument. It did not seem to be one of classical economics. He called the Bill "paltry" and said that it "pottered about with a few trumpery little remedies," yet he certainly did not want a more extensive measure. The fear of undermining the independence of the working class accounts for some of his hostility, but not all. Perhaps political enmity is part of the answer, or perhaps a bitterness which had deep psychological roots.<sup>32</sup>

Dilke rose to defend the Bill. Though it was not the Bill of the Royal Commission, neither was it "paltry." He stressed the importance of passing the Bill that session and listed all the advantages which would result from it. All reform could certainly not wait for the reform of London government. Several M.P.s agreed with Dilke and rose to support the whole Bill; others feared it was "centralizing", and the prison sites clause was particularly suspect. Rather rashly, Broadhurst drew the attention of the House to the fact that the prison clause, as Salisbury





had framed it, by admitting that the unearned increment of the land belonged to the public, echoed the principles of Henry George. But he too thought the Bill should be examined more closely in the next session. Collings was disappointed by the Bill and thought it would do little good. But neither would it do much harm, and it should be passed. A. J. Balfour, Dilke's successor at the Local Government Board, also urged M.P.s to accept it.<sup>33</sup>

Next day the wrangling over certain provisions in the Bill continued. Most speakers had reservations about particular items only. A Mr. Hopwood was unusual in his intransigent attitude: "He very much feared...that in the race for popularity the two Front Benches were disposed to sacrifice every economic principle in their desire to catch votes." Jesse Collings wished the procedural labyrinth which had been set up round the Lodging Houses Acts to be removed, but Dilke persuaded him to withdraw. Then, constituting itself as a Committee, the House proceeded to argue for three hours about the prison sites clause and whether the sites should be sold at market value or, as Salisbury had intended, at the lowest price possible without incurring a loss. It was argued that Salisbury's plan would entail stealing from the ratepayers, subsidizing housing, and undermining private enterprise. There was support for Lyulph Stanley's argument that the rest of the country would start demanding building sites. Finally the



clause was amended to include the words "at a fair market price." This meant that the arbiters were prevented from taking into consideration the aim of the purchase and must fix a price comparable to that of other valuable central London sites. With this concession, The Housing of the Working Classes Act: an Act to amend the law relating to the dwellings of the working classes was allowed to become law.<sup>34</sup>

Jesse Collings was one who was bitterly disappointed by the amendment to the prisons clause, despite his small expectations of what the Bill could do. In a letter to The Times he attacked the "so-called political economists" who had forced through cancellation of this clause. "This false political economy takes no heed of anything which has no visible price in the open market."<sup>35</sup> This outburst elicited a reply from a man who wondered if Collings would recognize Judas as a true political economist since "he was arguing for a dole to the poor just like Mr. Collings."<sup>36</sup> As Collings recognized, the amendment to the prison clause, though it might affect few people, was an important concession of principle. Those who had voted for the amendment refused to recognize the facts which controlled housing conditions in crowded cities. Where Salisbury and others had come to acknowledge that the old economic theories were, at least in some cases, irrelevant to the problem of urban housing, a majority of M.P.s failed to do



so.

Discussion of the Bill outside Parliament followed much the same lines. As usual the opponents of the Bill were heard most loudly: the slum dwellers who stood to gain from any measure of reform, however slight, were not organized and did not write letters to The Times. Earl Gray took up his pen to deplore the manner in which the rights of property and the laws of economy were ignored in the Bill, though he did think landlord responsibility should be enforced.<sup>37</sup> The Times reported the opposition organized by the workmen's mutual benefit societies against the Bill. These societies also objected to the "pauperization and socialism" entailed in selling prison sites below market price.<sup>38</sup> The Building Societies protested against Clause 13, which they believed would harm their interests by increasing owner liability.<sup>39</sup> The Association of Sanitary Inspectors and the Sanitary Institute proposed amendments which would strengthen the professional status and independence of sanitary officials.<sup>40</sup> The Secretary of the Mansion House Council, which had been so active in the housing agitation eighteen months before, wrote a long and rambling letter to The Times, in essence arguing that legislation should be made more effective and that the local administration of sanitary and public health matters should be improved.<sup>41</sup> The Economist was appalled at the Bill, believing that it introduced "state socialism" and accusing



Salisbury of "offering temptations to the erection of artisans' dwellings and the letting of them at less than market rents."<sup>42</sup>

After all the concern and discussion during the Bitter Cry agitation and the accumulation of arresting and disturbing evidence by the Royal Commission, the aftermath--the Report, Salisbury's Bill, the debates--is a distinct anti-climax. People who had a special concern or professional interest in housing problems continued to take the matter seriously, but the public response and the sense of urgency had gone. As always, it was easier to express concern than to ponder solutions, easier to stimulate excitement for a few days than to sustain it over a period of months. Salisbury's Act was a very small measure to come out of all the evidence; but it is clear that by 1885 people were no longer so concerned about working-class housing, especially now that they saw the difficulties of steering a legislative course between Government intervention and laissez-faire. Social, political and economic ideas were changing constantly throughout the late nineteenth century and particularly in the 1880's. But such developments are never smooth, and for the time being the question of urban housing had reached an impasse.





## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION: WHAT PREVENTED REAL REFORM

It was clear to many contemporaries that the housing legislation of 1885 was inadequate. Nevertheless, in the years before the First World War, parliamentary efforts to tackle the problem of working-class housing followed broadly the same lines as the Recommendations of the Housing Commission and the 1885 Act. Housing legislation continued to be dominated by two beliefs: that the basic problem was administrative rather than legislative and that private enterprise could and should cope with the nation's housing needs.

There was, of course, some constructive legislation in the years following the Housing Commission, even if the basic philosophy had not changed. The most important of these measures, the 1890 Housing Act, simplified and consolidated existing legislation to a considerable extent. The first part of this act dealt with large slum areas and incorporated the Cross Acts, while the second part superseded the Torrens Acts. Proceedings for instigating appeals against defaulting local authorities were included in the hope that this would encourage public interest and responsibility. There were also stricter compensation clauses and a section giving local authorities the power to acquire



land for housing or even actual houses.<sup>1</sup> Thus there was an admission that local government might have to take an active role in housing, in exceptional cases. The germ of future development was there; but already in 1852 Shaftesbury's Lodging Houses Acts had implied that public housing was admissible in rare cases, and the principle was contained in housing legislation from that time. In 1890, as in 1851 and 1885, the concept of active government participation in housing lay dormant, below the level of practical consideration. The 1890 Housing Act represents no significant departure in housing policy.

Other acts of this period sought to tackle specific aspects of the housing problem. In 1894, landlords were encouraged to undertake repairs to their property by the deduction of a fixed amount from their income tax assessment, although landlords who did not take advantage of this provision remained slightly better off.<sup>2</sup> The London Building Act of the same year was important as the first really effective building code, and in 1909 back-to-back houses were finally banned.<sup>3</sup> Home ownership was another principle which the government was prepared to take practical steps to encourage. The Small Dwellings Acquisition Act of 1898, which permitted local authorities to lend money for house purchase, gave expression to the dreams of men like Broadhurst that Britain might become a land of respectable, if small, property owners. Joseph Chamberlain declared



that this Act would "have a tendency to make them [the working class] better citizens, to give them a larger share in the country and to provide for them a popular and favourite form of thrift."<sup>4</sup> Home ownership certainly occupies an important place in the structure of British housing, but the Small Dwellings Acquisition Act reinforced the fatal illusion that the housing problem could be solved by individual prudence and initiative, with a minimum of government support. More significant for the future was the creation of the London County Council in 1888; the L.C.C. was one of the first authorities to take the housing provisions of earlier acts seriously and in the first 20 years of its existence the L.C.C. provided about 10,000 homes.<sup>5</sup> This example was not emulated by many local authorities. Like the earlier housing acts, the legislation passed between 1885 and 1919 left the basic problems of the slums virtually untouched. The actual shortage of housing may well have become worse in the decade before the First World War.<sup>6</sup>

Hindsight can distort, and the historical context of the Housing Commission must not be lost sight of. Nevertheless, it seems legitimate to ask why this Commission, for all the painstaking concern of its members, retained such a limited perspective on the subject of housing reform. The question can be put in more general terms. It is clear that the late Victorians were troubled by the housing



conditions of the poorer inhabitants of British towns and cities. Why then was there such a failure to contemplate or formulate effective solutions once the problems had been recognized? This disparity between recognizing the problems and prescribing solutions continued until the First World War. As Marion Bowley puts it: "The real break with the nineteenth century came rather late in the housing field."<sup>7</sup> The Royal Commission on Housing provides some answers to the question of why thinking on housing reached this impasse.

The problem of government intervention versus laissez-faire lies at the heart of all discussion of social questions in the nineteenth century, as indeed it has concerned those who formulate social policy in Britain to the present day. Broadly speaking, the spectrum of opinion on state intervention at any moment in the last 150 years has covered a wide range, with a tendency for majority opinion to cluster in the centre. This centre, and the extremes at either end, have gradually shifted in the direction of collectivism. Today there is general support for the idea of public housing and government intervention to deal with housing problems, though there may be argument about the extent and objectives of specific schemes.

In the 1880's state intervention in the supply of housing was considered unacceptable by the majority of those who were in a position to influence government





policy. It was recognized that some regulation of building standards and basic sanitary facilities was essential, but beyond this it was believed that remedies would prove more harmful than existing conditions. This idea was expressed in the open hostility which met the prison sites clause in Salisbury's Bill, a measure which would have had insignificant results, but which contained the principle of subsidies for working class housing. The efforts of charitable organizations and philanthropists were widely known, and for a time at least they encouraged the welcome idea that charity was competent to deal with the slums. It was widely held that state housing schemes would ruin the private builder, and people were still haunted by a fear of public spending and burdening the rates--even when this was felt to be necessary. House building did not come into this category of necessary though regrettable expenditure. Housing had always been supplied by private enterprise, and it was assumed that if the poor did not face the same conditions in the property market as everyone else the economy would be disrupted and the whole working class demoralised.

This was the moderate view. But the extreme laissez-faire position, which maintained that any regulation of the "rights of property" would have disastrous results, was not without influence at this time. To people with such views, the rights of the house owner were particularly sacrosanct, for housing had a symbolic importance as one of the most



tangible and widely held forms of property. The connexion between this political philosophy and party politics was complex and ambiguous in the 1880's. Those who clung to the doctrines of laissez-faire with an almost religious fervour were to be found in both major parties; though the defence of free enterprise was historically a Liberal pre-occupation, much of this initiative was passing to the Conservative Party, which was broadening its social base. At the same time, both parties continued to contain a significant number of people who supported an active policy of domestic legislation.

Lord Wemyss (who called himself a "Liberal Conservative") was an active proponent of this laissez-faire philosophy, and had formed the Liberty and Property Defence League (the association of ideas is significant) to uphold it. Another example was George Joachim Goschen, a member of the Housing Commission and a Liberal M.P. who later moved over to the Conservative side. He was one of the authors of the Commission memorandum which deplored "measures ... which are calculated to weaken the motives which prompt the steady development of private enterprise," and Goschen added to this memorandum his dissent from the proposal to tax vacant land.<sup>8</sup> A study of Goschen's political philosophy concludes: "Goschen neither realized nor understood that yesterday's utopia--and the belief that society could function by means of a self-regulating



market was exactly that--was an inadequate response to the challenges presented by a mass democracy and an industrialized society."<sup>9</sup> The laissez-faire philosophy, in vogue in the first part of the nineteenth century, was anachronistic by the 1880's and even in its heyday it had more force as a rallying cry than as a practical formula. By the late nineteenth century, those who were fearful of any government intervention in social welfare were growing fewer. But such people, being older men, tended to hold positions of authority and carried weight in important business and financial circles. If there was something of the dinosaur about Lord Wemyss and his associates, the advocates of government intervention still felt it necessary to anticipate and counter the laissez-faire position.

At the other extreme were men who were prepared to entertain the idea of active government control in the field of housing conditions, rents and supply. Those who argued the case for government participation in the housing of the working class (as opposed to mere regulation of existing conditions) at the hearings of the Housing Commission formed a small but varied group. Several of them were churchmen. Cardinal Manning, though he contributed few new ideas, was eager to see significant extensions to social legislation. An Anglican clergyman the Reverend Alfred T. Fryer, who was curate of St. Philip's Clerkenwell, was one of the most outspoken opponents of



unrestricted free enterprise in housing to appear before the Commission. He believed that rents should be fixed and thought government intervention should go even further than that: "I am afraid with my knowlegde of life, that you cannot expect to meet this evil in that way, that you cannot build to any extent in order to provide the working classes with the accomodation they require simply by private enterprise." The Reverend Mr. Billing of Christ Church Spitalfields made a strong appeal for taxation for rehousing to be extended over the whole metropolis. State subsidies for rents were suggested to the Commission by a Bristol philanthropist, F. G. Barnett.<sup>10</sup> The political viewpoint of these men is a matter of speculation. It is probable that they were not active in party politics but were driven by their social concern to urge collectivist solutions for specific problems which arose in urban communities.

The people who sought housing reform through politics belonged to one or other of the established parties. Socialism in Britain was in its embryonic stage. By the time the Commission's findings on working-class housing in England were published Hyndman's Marxist Social Democratic Federation was only four years old, the Fabian Society had been in existence two years, and Morris' Socialist League had been formed less than a year. There was also the Christian Socialist Guild of Saint Matthew, founded in





1875.<sup>11</sup> These were the only groups in England propounding any form of socialist theory, and they had only a few hundred members between them. Organized labour in the 1880's was not advocating wide-ranging government intervention to improve social conditions. Before the changes in the labour movement that came with "New Unionism" in the late 1880's, organized labour was conservative and cautious. The unions were craft organizations of the more successful artisans, whose views on social legislation in general and the housing question in particular were well represented by the statements of Henry Broadhurst or the Building Society officials who gave evidence before the Commission. For them home ownership was the one solution; they refused to recognize the conditions which made home ownership impossible for many. There were individuals in the labour movement whose ideas went beyond this. One was George Shipton, Secretary of the London Trades Council, who told the Commission that a whole system of housing for working class people should be developed through the agency of local authorities. "What the individual cannot do the state or municipality must seek to accomplish."<sup>12</sup> This was an extraordinary view for any contemporary to hold and in general it was not from the labour movement that collectivist ideas emerged at the time of the Housing Commission.

Apart from Cardinal Manning, the members of the Commission who supported wider government activity in the



housing field were all politicians. One of the most important witnesses, Joseph Chamberlain, was also a well-known political figure. Since the battle for housing reform is ultimately a legislative one, the political background of these men is important. Lord Salisbury's attitude to the slum problem has already been mentioned. While deploring social change, by the mid-1880's he was ready to accept and even initiate relatively wide-ranging legislation in order to secure the stability and welfare of the nation. It is clear that he felt these were threatened by the conditions revealed in the Commission's investigations. There is a link here with the political philosophy of Disraeli, but Salisbury was also influenced at this time by a group of younger contemporaries, the Tory Democrats, led by Lord Randolph Churchill. In the 1880's this group was urging on the Conservative Party an active programme of reform in order to gain the allegiance of the working class and forestall the Liberals. It is doubtful whether this approach was in accordance with the outlook of the Conservative Party as it was developing in this period, or with the basic political philosophy of Salisbury himself.<sup>13</sup> However, though Salisbury was not convinced that Tory Democracy was in the best interests of either the party or the nation, he was clear at this point that the seriousness of the housing situation demanded limited local authority building and the experiment in subsidized housing outlined



in the prison sites proposal.

The collectivist wing of the Liberal party was well represented on the Housing Commission. This group, in some ways the parallel of the Tory Democrats, was a fairly cohesive body with a dynamic and original leader, Joseph Chamberlain, and a political programme which had recently been set out in the Fortnightly Review under the title "The Radical Programme." These Radicals, represented on the Commission itself by Dilke and Collings and by Chamberlain in the capacity of witness, were opposed on nearly every issue to the orthodox Liberal philosophy of Gladstone or Morley. Among the measures advocated in the Radical Programme were the reform of property taxation, the extension of local government powers and, most significant in connexion with housing, the power of local authorities "to obtain land for all public purposes at its fair value and "to let land for artisans' dwellings."<sup>14</sup> The Radical Liberals did not have all the answers to the housing problem; for one thing they tended to see the solution to social problems in the narrow context of land reform. In his evidence to the Housing Commission, Chamberlain gave his opinion that building could be left to private enterprise once land values had been fairly dealt with.<sup>15</sup> The redistribution of wealth by direct means was alien to Chamberlain's philosophy.<sup>16</sup> But short of this, he believed in the principle of government action to relieve social injustice. Others, like Dilke,



were prepared to go further than Chamberlain in advocating a more positive approach to reform, including government intervention in the economics of housing. Although the Radical Liberals presented a united front at the time of the Housing Commission, the seeds of disagreement were already there. While Dilke spent the remainder of his political life in the left wing of the Liberal party, Chamberlain, Collings, and a number of others moved closer to the Conservative party in their emphasis on national unity and imperial strength--a relationship which was eventually formalized in the Unionist-Conservative alliance.

Although legislation to regulate overcrowding, sanitation and limited slum clearance was generally accepted, the defenders of the extreme laissez-faire position set up a barrier against the extension of government action in the housing field which the reformers were powerless to breach. The political position of the men in the Conservative and Liberal parties who did advocate public responsibility for adequate housing was ambiguous and even suspect to many of the political establishment. Despite the efforts of Chamberlain and Churchill, social welfare did not become a party political matter in the late nineteenth century and as Lord Salisbury had hoped, "acute political controversy" did not develop around the housing question. Although the bitterness of political strife was avoided, the housing issue was also deprived of the urgency, the





original ideas, the enthusiasm and the dedicated champions which a political issue may attract. Working-class housing fared better in 1919 when "Homes fit for Heroes" was an election slogan. Perhaps it was never possible for housing to become a political issue in the mid-1880's. Any matter which men consider vital tends to become a political one. The apolitical spirit in which the slum problem was discussed at the time of the Housing Commission reflects the low priority which politicians attached to it, despite some genuine concern about housing problems.

It is clear that the Commissioners failed to regard the housing problem with sufficient urgency partly because of the vast gulf between even the most progressive, sympathetic members of the middle class and the "poor" whose housing was being investigated. Like most administrators and legislators the Commissioners were personally detached from the housing problem. They had no experience of poverty and overcrowding (except perhaps for Broadhurst); but more important, there was a cultural gap too wide to be bridged even in imagination. This gap is painfully clear in the findings of the Housing Commission: the bland statement in the unanimous section of the Report that "the warmest apologist for the working classes would not assert the general prevalence of cleanly habits among them"; Octavia Hill's remark that "if you have water on every floor, that is sufficient for working people"; the concern



with morals that recurs in the evidence again and again.<sup>17</sup> There is an air of sympathy and concern, but little empathy or understanding; it is one race of people discussing another which is assumed to be inferior in terms of development, intelligence and needs. It is evident that the Commissioners believed that the poor had not only lower standards and expectations, which was no doubt true, but also that they needed fewer amenities (space, light, running water) in order to lead healthy and happy lives. If this had not been the assumption, the Recommendations would surely have contained more urgent demands for more radical reforms. Although this official and political detachment has not entirely disappeared today and social policy is still marked by the class-orientation of those who formulate it, the experience of continuing national prosperity, mass urban society, the depression and two world wars has produced a more integrated view of society in which the welfare of any large group cannot be disregarded.

A second consequence of the deep gulf between the poorer members of the working class and the middle and upper classes in Victorian England was that the poor and underprivileged had no political voice and no influence over legislative or administrative decisions. They were uneducated: education had only been compulsory for nine years when the Commission Report appeared and most adults had been born too late to benefit from the free state system.



The education that was available for the working class child was "elementary" in every sense. Perhaps more important was the fact that politics and public life in general were regarded as the prerogative of the middle and upper-classes. The suffrage had been considerably extended in 1884 but there were still some men who were not enfranchised, especially in local elections. Women, who often bore the brunt of poverty and bad housing, had no vote. However, the floating slum population would probably not have participated in elections even if they had been able to.

The very poor were equally helpless in making their presence felt outside formal politics. They did not threaten or protest; apathy, fear, ignorance and inarticulateness kept them quiet. The apprehensions of some witnesses about working class discontent were unfounded. This was to change somewhat in the next four or five years as "New Unionism" swept through sections of the casual labour force and the Labour Party began to organize. But housing was not the immediate concern of the New Unions or the Labour Party, and neither of these groups had substantial success in organizing the slum population.

Ideas about the scope of government responsibility for city conditions were seriously restricted in the late nineteenth century by the concern with public health which dated from the 1840's, when Chadwick first caught public attention with his Report on the Sanitary Condition of the



Labouring Population. Chadwick stressed the importance of sewage, street cleaning and a pure water supply in the prevention of disease. From the time of the public health campaign urban improvement had been seen in terms of the removal of waste and "nuisances." Despite the persistence of primitive arrangements for water and sanitation in many areas, (several examples were brought to the attention of the Commission) the achievements of the "sanitary idea" were spectacular. Cholera and typhus had almost been eradicated in England by the late nineteenth century and towns were certainly healthier in the 1880's than they had been when Chadwick and Simon began their work.

But the very success of the sanitary reform movement prevented people from looking beyond it to the wider context of public health. Chadwick's concept of public health was narrow in scope; it was negative and regulatory, with the prevention of epidemic disease as its one goal. Though Chadwick's ideas and methods were innovative in his own time, they were totally inadequate to meet the conditions revealed in the evidence before the Housing Commission. Yet it is clear that even in the 1880's the hopes of reformers still centred on the sanitary idea. The belief that slum clearance was good in itself was an extension of this approach, and the Report and many of the Recommendations of the Commission, especially those sections referring to London, reflect the contemporary preoccupation





with "nuisance removal," sanitary inspection and pure water. The sanitary campaign limited the perspective of urban reformers; it also reinforced the assumption that while public control of water and sewage was desirable, beyond this point private enterprise would respond to public needs if coerced and that regulation rather than innovation was the role of government.<sup>18</sup>

Housing was also a victim of the social priorities of nineteenth century society. The Victorians showed even less concern than the present generation for the environment as a whole, and this was certainly a factor which delayed proper consideration of the nation's housing needs. The better-off Victorians had access to unspoilt countryside and set great store by natural beauty, and they were active in creating urban parks in many towns and cities. There was also a sincere if often misplaced enthusiasm for the buildings of the Middle Ages and pride in contemporary monuments--towns, churches and railway stations (buildings which had so often caused the eviction of working class tenants). But nineteenth century society also assumed that squalor and dirt were inevitable concomitants of wealth and progress: "Where there's brass there's muck." This connexion was taken for granted even by social critics like Ruskin and Morris, though they were unusual in declaring that "progress" rather than the environment should be sacrificed. Urban deterioration and



human wretchedness had certainly grown less tolerable to the society of the 1880's and there was a new awareness of the waste in human resources that dirt and disease produced. But Victorians continued to rate social costs and the quality of urban life low on their list of priorities.

These were some of the factors which curbed the development of a comprehensive housing policy through the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth. As in many other fields it was the economic and social demands of the First World War which compelled the government to abandon the essentially negative attitude towards the problems of working class housing. Inflation and the reduced level of building began to force up rents and in response to public protests the 1915 Rent and Mortgage Restriction Act was made law. Though there was no deliberate change of policy, this Act was a major breakthrough. For rent control involved the government in the economics of housing at a fundamental level, and this responsibility could not be discarded lightly at the end of the war. The war also encouraged the acceptance of government intervention in a wide range of social and economic affairs. Ideas about the interrelation of society, the justice and expediency of social welfare and the limitations of the individualistic social philosophy had been maturing since the period of the Housing Commission. The war made politicians and the public more sensitive towards these



ideas and in the exceptional conditions of wartime it was feasible to put collectivist policies into practice.

The most significant result of these developments in the field of housing was the 1919 Housing and Town Planning Act which, despite many limitations, marks a revolution in housing policy. This Act finally accepted that private enterprise alone could not meet housing needs and that public responsibility must go beyond slum clearance. Local authorities were obliged to meet the housing deficiencies in their areas and to make this practicable Treasury subsidies were available.<sup>19</sup> There have been changes in emphasis, but the principles of the 1919 Housing Act have informed housing policy in Britain to the present day, supplemented by surveillance of the public sector, subsidies for individual improvements, extended regulation of housing conditions and a greater stress on town planning. Local authority loans and tax relief schemes have contributed to the growth of house-buying in installments, though the main initiative has come from the building societies.

These were the lines along which housing policy developed once public responsibility for adequate housing had been accepted. The housing problem came to be seen in more comprehensive terms that the Housing Commission had been aware of: it had become a national issue rather than one which concerned only the alien section of society known as the "poor" (though it has always been assumed that the



tenants of "council housing" will be mainly working class). Housing and town planning have been linked, in theory at least, and the social government environment related to the physical. Housing is now regarded as a social service to the extent that over 20% of all householders are now local authority tenants, and the proportion is increasing.<sup>20</sup>

There is room for disagreement about the role and aims of government housing policy in the future. But it is clear that, given the economics of housing and the needs of a crowded, urbanized society, an active government housing policy, including public housing on a large scale, is essential in Britain if the population is to be well housed. These facts were inadmissible in 1885. If the achievement has often been disappointing, an important change has taken place in our ideas.





## FOOTNOTES

### CHAPTER I

1

For example, Octavia Hill's work dated from the 1860's, as did the housing activities of the Peabody Trust. Two examples of periodical articles on housing before the 1880's are G. Potter, "The First Point of the New Charter: Improved Dwellings for the People," Contemporary Review, XVIII (November, 1871), pp. 547-549 and W. McCullagh Torrens, "What is to be done with the slums?", Macmillans Magazine, XXXIX (April, 1879), pp. 533-545.

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Dyos, "The Slum Observed," p. 151.

8

See the illustrations by Doré in Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold, London, a Pilgrimage (New York: B. Blom, 1968. Reprint of 1857 edition).

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Asa Briggs, "Public Health: The Sanitary Idea," New Society, February 15, 1968, p. 229; Asa Briggs, "Cholera and Society in the Nineteenth Century," Past and Present, No. 19, 1961, pp. 84-85.



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Briggs, "Public Health: The Sanitary Idea," pp. 229-231.

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Edward Bowmaker, The Housing of the Working Classes (London: Methuen and Co., 1895), pp. 28-29; Parliamentary Papers, Vol. XXX (1884-1885), "Royal Commission on the Housing of the Working Classes" (subsequently referred to as RCHWC), Vol. II, pp. 14-18.

12

Ibid.

13

Bowmaker, The Housing of the Working Classes, pp. 29-31; Dyos, "The Slum Observed," p. 152; RCHWC, II, pp. 18-32.

14

Parliamentary Papers, Vol. VII (1881), Vol. VII (1882), "Select Committee on Artisans' and Labourers' Dwellings and Other Acts."

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RCHWC, II, pp. 386-390.

16

Dyos, "The Slum Observed," p. 152.

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K. B. Smellie, A History of Local Government (2nd. ed.; London: George Allen and Unwin, 1949), pp. 39-48.

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William A. Robson, The Government and Misgovernment of London (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1939), pp. 62-70; Smellie, A History of Local Government, pp. 98-99, pp. 180-184.

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The missionary movement in the slums is described in K. S. Inglis, The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963) pp. 28-30. Elsewhere in his book, Inglis discusses in detail the work of the main denominations among the slum population.

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David Owen, English Philanthropy 1660-1960 (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 372-393.



21

Ibid.

22

See for example the description of Katherine Buildings in Beatrice Webb, My Apprenticeship (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1926), pp. 254-255. Examples of nineteenth century "model dwellings" may be seen today; there are, for instance, thousands of Londoners still living in somewhat modernised Peabody Buildings (Terry Coleman, "Peabody's of Today," Guardian, November 3, 1969).

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Webb, My Apprenticeship, p. 266.

24

See for example the list of rules in force in Peabody tenements, Bowmaker, The Housing of the Working Classes, pp. 174-175.

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3

"Horrible London" and "How the Poor Live" were the titles of articles published by G. R. Sims in the Pictorial World in 1883. Anthony S. Wohl, "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London," International Review of Social History, XIII, Pt. 2, pp. 203-204.

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Daily Telegraph, October 31, 1883, quoted in Wohl, "The Bitter Cry," p. 189.

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Octavia Hill et al., "Commonsense and the Dwellings of the Poor," Nineteenth Century, XIV (December, 1883): Octavia Hill, "Improvements now Practicable," pp. 925-933; Lord Shaftesbury, "The Mischief of State Aid," pp. 934-939; H. O. Arnold-Forster, "The Existing Law," pp. 940-951; William Glazier, "A Workman's Reflections," pp. 952-963.

20

Lambert, "The Outcast Poor I," pp. 916-923.

21

Andrew Mearns, "The Outcast Poor II: Outcast London," pp. 924-933.

22

The Times, November 16, 1883, p. 4.

23

Ibid., November 13, 1883, p. 3 and December 5, p. 4.

24

See for example a letter from Edith Simcox advocating halving rents and doubling wages (The Times, January 7, 1884, p. 4) and letters citing housing schemes abroad (Ibid., November 1, p. 2 and December 5, p. 4).

25

Ibid., December 12, p. 10.

26

For example, a group was set up in Blackheath



(The Times, November 12, 1883, p. 10) and another in Brompton (Ibid., January 16, 1884, p. 7). A paper on slum housing was read to the Diocesan Conference in Liverpool (Ibid., November 7, 1883, p. 5).

27

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Magnus, King Edward the Seventh, pp. 179-180.

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Stephen Gwynn and Gertrude M. Tuckwell, The Life of the Rt. Hon. Sir Charles Dilke (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917), Vol. II, p. 18.

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Pall Mall Gazette, quoted in The Times, February 23, 1884, p. 12.

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Dictionary of National Biography (2nd. supplement; Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 138-140.

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Dictionary of National Biography, VIII, pp. 58-59.

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Thomas J. Spinner Jr., "George Joachim Goschen: The Man Lord Randolph Churchill 'Forgot'," Journal of Modern History, XXXIX (December, 1967), pp. 405-424.



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53

Gwynn and Tuckwell, Sir Charles Dilke, II, p. 17.

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55

Dictionary of National Biography, VIII, pp. 448-449; Gwynn and Tuckwell, Sir Charles Dilke, II, p. 19.

56

Jenkins, Sir Charles Dilke, p. 176.

57

Gwynn and Tuckwell, Sir Charles Dilke, II, pp. 16-17.

### CHAPTER III

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RCHWC, I, pp. iii-iv.

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Ibid., II, p. 304.

3

Ibid., p. 310.

4

P. and G. Ford, A Guide to Parliamentary Papers (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), pp. 39-41.

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This point is made by Wohl, "The Bitter Cry," pp. 231-232.

6

Charles Booth calculated five years later that 30% of London's population was living "in poverty." Booth, Life and Labour, II, p. 21.

7

RCHWC, II, p. 33; I, p. 9.





8  
Booth, Life and Labour, I, p. 33.

9  
RCHWC, I, pp. 24-27.

10  
Ibid., II, p. 2.

11  
Ibid., I, p. 12.

12  
Ibid., II, p. 239, p. 201, p. 35, p. 62, p. 66.

13  
Ibid., p. 482, p. 267, p. 126.

14  
Wohl refers to this Victorian concept of "home."  
Wohl, "The Bitter Cry," p. 217.

15  
RCHWC, II, p. 88, pp. 168-172.

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Clapham, An Economic History of Modern Britain,  
II, pp. 440-441.

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John R. Kellett, The Impact of Railways on  
Victorian Cities (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,  
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19  
Select Committee on Artisans' and Labourers'  
Dwellings, p. 439.

20  
RCHWC, II, p. 352.

21  
Ibid., p. 61.

22  
Ibid., p. 369, p. 66. "Usually the last part of  
the approach line ran through...market gardens or through  
slum terrace and cellar dwellings leased in batches of



eight or ten to middlemen but...conveniently owned by a few larger landowners whose goodwill had been secured." These areas were cheap and because the land was owned by a few men and the tenants had no rights, the purchase was legally simple. Kellett, The Impact of Railways, pp. 4-5, pp. 331-335.

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Dyos, "The Slum Observed," p. 152.

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St. James' Gazette, quoted in Asa Briggs, The History of Birmingham (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), Vol. II, p. 83.

25

RCHWC, II, p. 257, pp. 280-281.

26

Ibid., p. 134, p. 190, p. 217, p. 243.

27

Ibid., p. 37.

28

Ibid., p. 80, p. 77, p. 30, p. 120, p. 183.

29

Ibid., p. 37, p. 130.

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Ibid., p. 229. For a mid-twentieth century example of obtuseness and insensitivity towards community ties in a similar situation, see Michael Young and Peter Wilmott, Family and Kinship in East London (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), Pt. 2.

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Booth demonstrates the relationship between occupation and place of residence in London in this period. 63-65% of dock labourers, costermongers and tailors lived in the central part of the city, compared with 15-20% of professional men and clerks. Booth, Life and Labour, IX, p. 31.

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H. J. Dyos, Victorian Suburb (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1961), pp. 56-57.

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RCHWC, II, p. 5.



34  
Ibid., pp. 65-67.

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 Dyos, Victorian Suburb, p. 111.

36  
Ibid., p. 25.

37  
 Dyos, "The Slum Observed," p. 153.

38  
RCHWC, II, pp. 430-437, pp. 342-350, p. 357.

39  
Ibid., p. 337. This view that commuter travel grew through the expansion of a suburban population rather than the other way around (railway promotion creating suburbs) is corroborated by a modern historian, Kellett, The Impact of Railways, p. 380.

40  
RCHWC, II, p. 289.

41  
Ibid., p. 351, p. 150.

42  
Ibid., p. 290.

43  
Ibid., p. 247, pp. 282-283.

44  
Ibid., p. 494.

45  
Ibid., p. 199.

46  
Ibid., p. 71.

47  
Ibid., p. 43, p. 166, p. 482, p. 267, p. 247.

48  
Ibid., I, p. 12.

49  
Ibid., II, pp. 32-58, p. 159, pp. 104-112.



50  
Ibid., p. 120.

51  
Ibid., pp. 260-265.

52  
Ibid., p. 78.

53  
Ibid., p. 172.

54  
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55  
Ibid., p. 297.

56  
For a report on the operation of the Cross Acts to  
1884, see RCHWC, II, Appendix, pp. 690-710.

57  
Ibid., p. 14, pp. 17-24, p. 233.

58  
Ibid., pp. 218-227, p. 284.

59  
Ibid., p. 20.

60  
Ibid., 218.

61  
Ibid., p. 92, p. 108.

62  
Ibid., pp. 655-658, p. 34.

63  
Ibid., p. 257.

64  
Ibid., p. 267.

65  
Ibid., pp. 527-533.

66  
Ibid., p. 36.





67

This aspect of the Peabody Trust is discussed in J. Nelson Tarn, "The Peabody Donation Fund: the Role of a Housing Society in the Nineteenth Century," Victorian Studies, X (September, 1966), pp. 27-29.

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RCHWC, II, p. 170, p. 97, p. 415.

69

Ibid., p. 474.

70

Ibid., pp. 240-241, p. 227, p. 29, pp. 441-442.

71

Ibid., pp. 128-129.

72

Ibid., pp. 288-298.

73

Ibid., p. 191.

74

Ibid., pp. 392-400, pp. 671-680.

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Ibid., p. 497.

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Ibid., pp. 371-379, pp. 517-519, p. 253.

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Ibid., pp. 438-440, pp. 520-524.

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Ibid., pp. 680-682.

79

Ibid., p. 358, p. 40.

80

H. J. Dyos, "The Slum Attacked," New Society, February 8, 1968, p. 193.



CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>  
p. 277. Gwynn and Tuckwell, Sir Charles Dilke, II, p. 18,

<sup>2</sup>  
McClelland, Manning, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>  
RCHWC, I, pp. 7-14.

<sup>4</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 14-16.

<sup>5</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 16-24.

<sup>6</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 30-37.

<sup>7</sup>  
Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>8</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 37-40.

<sup>9</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 42-49, p. 30, pp. 56-58.

<sup>10</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 48-53, p. 56.

<sup>11</sup>  
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<sup>12</sup>  
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<sup>13</sup>  
Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 73-76.

<sup>15</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 62-65.

<sup>16</sup>  
Ibid., p. 66.



17  
Ibid., pp. 60-61.

18  
Ibid., pp. 67-73.

19  
Ibid., pp. 76-81.

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Gwynn and Tuckwell, Sir Charles Dilke, II, pp. 277-278.

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Pall Mall Gazette, May 8, 1885, quoted in Wohl, "The Bitter Cry," p. 233.

22  
The Times, May 8, 1885.

23  
Reynolds' Newspaper, May 17, 1885, quoted in Lynd, England in the Eighteen-Eighties, p. 151.

24  
The Times, November 26, 1885.

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Parliamentary Papers, Vol. II (1884-5), "Housing of the Working Classes (England) Bill [Lords]."

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Ibid., cols. 890-897.

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Ibid., cols. 1169-1172.

29  
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30  
Ibid., 299 (1885), cols. 1169-1177, cols. 1338-1341.

31  
Ibid., 300 (1885), cols. 1585-1591.



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Ibid., cols. 1592-1597. Even the Dictionary of National Biography describes Stanley as "severely critical and caustic in speech" and "not an easy man to deal with." Dictionary of National Biography (4th. supplement), p. 807.

33

Hansard, 300, cols. 1597-1621.

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Ibid., cols. 1745-1889.

35

The Times, August 17, 1885, p. 10.

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Ibid., August 18, 1885, p. 8.

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Ibid., August 10, 1885, p. 6.

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Ibid., July 27, 1885, p. 7.

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Economist, July 18, 1885, quoted in Lynd, England in the Eighteen-Eighties.

## CHAPTER V

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2

Nevitt, Housing, Taxation and Subsidies, pp. 44-45.

3

Dyos, "The Slum Attacked," p. 94.





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Cullingworth, Housing and Local Government, p. 233.

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London County Council, Housing of the Working Classes in London (London: London County Council, 1913), Appendix VII.

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Clapham, An Economic History of Modern Britain, III, pp. 463-464.

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Bowley, Housing and the State, p. 2.

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RCHWC, II, p. 69.

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Spinner, "George Joachim Goschen," p. 424.

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R. C. K. Ensor, England 1870-1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 100.

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Speech at Warrington, September 8, 1885. Charles W. Boyd, ed., Mr. Chamberlain's Speeches (London: Constable and Company, 1914), Vol. I, p. 190.

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RCHWC, II, p. 443.

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which was acute in other large cities, was not so serious there (Clapham, An Economic History of Modern Britain, II, p. 492).

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Bruce, The Coming of the Welfare State, p. 56.

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